

Remade

TheRealThing

Star Wars

Complete



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This story was first published on July 26th, 2006, and was last updated on May 5th, 2007.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/ltzkz1n0/5zf00C5S

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Summary

title Remade
author TheRealThing
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3068066/>
published July 26th, 2006
updated May 5th, 2007
words 167,338
chapters 108
status Complete
rating Fiction T
tags Adventure, Complete, Darth Vader, Drama, Fanfiction, Leia O., Movies, Star Wars

Description:

An AU story starting after A New Hope in which Vader discovers that he has been lied to by his master about the death of his wife and children, and sets out to avenge them.

Chapter 1

CHAPTER 1

The officers and men aboard the *Executor* were confused. Just as they had finally thought they had figured out how to deal with their fearsome commanding officer, he changed. The change was not for the better. Indeed, if anything, Lord Vader had become more terrifying than ever, for his single minded obsession with finding the rebel responsible for destroying the Death Star verged on madness. At least, that is what the men thought.

Vader had always been a draconian, incredibly demanding commander, but at least the men knew what to expect from him. If you mess up, you die. If you question him, you die. If you say the wrong thing, you might just get tossed against a bulkhead, unless he was in a particularly foul mood, in which case you would die. Since being given the command of the super star destroyer, Vader had established his iron rule in very short order. The men actually had a pool going to see who would die on any given day. Vader knew about this, though the men didn't realize it. He secretly found it amusing that the men took their own lives so lightly that they were willing to wager their monthly earnings on who would die.

As for Vader, his own life had been, for the past 20 years, in service to his master, the galactic emperor, Palpatine. He had no other purpose but to serve him and keep the Sith alive and well. All that had changed when Vader had learned the name of the rebel who had destroyed the Death Star: *Luke Skywalker*. Vader had turned his back on the Skywalker name two decades ago, and all it represented. That was the day his soul had been irrevocably consumed by the Dark Side, the day he learned that he had done the unthinkable, the unforgivable, the day his master had told him that he had killed his Angel.

But now everything he thought he knew had been turned upside down. His son was alive! *Our son...* How is it possible that the child lived when Palpatine had told him that the mother had died still bearing him? Vader himself had seen footage of the funeral, had seen her swollen belly as the coffin carrying her moved slowly through the streets of Theed. She was still pregnant when she had died, pregnant with his child... with his son...

None of it made sense, and it had caused Vader to question the very reasons he had sworn allegiance to the emperor in the first place. Palpatine had promised to help him save her, but this promise had been conveniently forgotten in the carnage that Vader had committed in the name of galactic peace. *How did it all go so astray? And what had become of her? If this son lived, what had become of the mother?* It was not surprising that the men aboard the *Executor* had found their commander to be more moody and irritable than usual, for his mind was in turmoil over these difficult, life altering questions.

Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2

Lord Vader paced up and down the bridge of the Executor, restless and impatient for word from the probe droids. They had been dispatched four months earlier, and still there was no sign, no word of the whereabouts of the rebels. His son was a part of that rebellion, a leader in fact. *He was his father's son...* Vader reflected grimly. There was something else that was on his mind however, something that he had not expected. He could not get his mind off of the young princess from Alderaan who he had held prisoner on the Death Star... held her prisoner and tortured her. There had been something so familiar about her face, something that at the time he gave no consideration to. But now, now that he knew that his son was alive... was it possible that this young woman was his offspring as well? Could Padmé have been carrying twins? It had been a very long time since Darth Vader had felt anything akin to guilt, but now, recalling the tortured screams of the Princess, he felt a cold pit in his stomach. Her ability to resist the mind probes had been indeed impressive. *Worthy of a Jedi...*

Vader had searched the Imperial net for information about the princess, but the information about her was rather sketchy. It indicated that she was from Alderaan, but not that she had been born there. It cited Bail Organa and his wife Breha as the parents of the princess, but that meant nothing if they had adopted her, which is what Vader suspected. He had even compared holographic images of the two women side by side, and the resemblance was undeniable.

Leia was the daughter of Padmé Naberrie, the daughter of Anakin Skywalker. She'd given birth to twins, a girl and a boy. *So why had she appeared pregnant if the twins had already been born? More to the point, why had Palpatine told him that he had killed her when she had obviously lived to give birth to his children?* Vader did not wish to consider the answer to these questions, for it only made the gnawing feeling within him worse.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3

"Report," Vader barked as he approached the station where the readouts from the probe droids were being analyzed.

"Nothing yet, sir," Captain Piett replied. "The reports from the Naboo System are just coming in now."

Naboo system? Vader pondered as an idea started to take form in his mind. He had to know for certain that she was indeed dead, for given his recent astonishing discoveries; it seemed highly likely that her death was a lie too. And if he were right....*he didn't want to think about the repercussions.*

"Make for the Naboo System," Vader announced. Piett looked up at Vader in surprise.

"The Naboo System, my lord?" he asked.

"At once," Vader replied. "Maximum velocity."

The *Executor* arrived at the Naboo System 12 hours later.

"Prepare a shuttle," Vader instructed one of his underlings. The men followed his commands, no matter how strange they found them and this was no different. Lord Vader usually had good reason for his solitary journeys, not that any of them men were privy to those reasons. The planet Naboo, however, was a mystery to the men, who, of course knew nothing about Vader's connection with the beautiful planet.

Having left the *Executor*, Vader piloted the shuttle to the planet surface, making his heading for the capital city of Theed. He was not concerned about being spotted; he was the emperor's right hand, and owed no one an explanation for his presence. However, when he arrived at the mausoleum on the outskirts of the city, there were some who questioned his motives.

"Lord Vader," the guard standing sentry at the cemetery gate greeted him. "Can I help you?"

"You can stand aside," Vader replied. "That is the only thing I require of you."

The man did so at once, not wanting to tangle with the infamous Dark Lord.

Vader had been here before, and knew exactly where to go. A mausoleum of glass and stone, at the top of a small stone staircase, he had seen it many time in his dreams, only one of many dreams of her that had tormented him over the past 20 years. *But what if all those years without her had been a lie?* He was determined to find out once and for all.

Vader entered the mausoleum, the setting sun illuminating the interior with a warm, muted glow. The only sound to be heard was the mechanical sound of his breathing and his boots upon the stone. He approached the crypt reverently, his eyes fixed upon the holographic

image of her suspended above it. Even now, after so many years apart, the sight of her face still took his breath away. Her death had been like his own. *Did he have the strength to do this?* He wondered as he stood transfixed by the sight of her angelic face. What if he was wrong? Could he live with himself if he did this if he were? Vader stood perfectly still, struggling with the decision that could change his world irrevocably. Finally he decided, and moved toward the crypt.

“Forgive me, my angel,” he murmured as he laid his hands upon the marble lid of the coffin. Summoning his enormous physical strength as well as the power of the Force, he slowly slid the lid aside, carefully lowering it to the floor beside the casket. Taking a deep breath, he stepped over to the open grave and looked inside. It was empty.

What Vader felt as he stared into the empty casket not even he could describe. So many emotions, conflicting and chaotic, raged through him. *Confusion, shock, betrayal.....*It had been so long since he had felt anything akin to happiness that he was almost afraid to acknowledge the spark of it inside his shattered heart. But if the empty tomb meant that she was not dead... *where was she? And why had his master lied to him?* Vader clenched his fists in silent fury as he reeled under the implications of that one sentence; *It seems in your anger you killed her...*

“I will find you, Padmé,” Vader spoke aloud. “No matter how long it takes me, I will find you. And Palpatine shall rue the day he was born.”

Chapter 4

CHAPTER 4

Darth Vader returned to the *Executor* to meditate on what he had just discovered. He spoke to no one, merely left the hangar bay and made his way to his private quarters.

Alone in the privacy of his residence, Vader entered his hyperbolic chamber. Only here could he remove the mask that sustained his life and breathe the near pure oxygen atmosphere that the chamber provided him. It was the only place where he could feel even remotely human anymore, the cybernetics having transformed him years ago into something more machine than man.

Vader brooded as he sat in the chamber, dark thoughts filling his troubled mind. Everything he thought he knew, everything he believed in, was a lie. *What do I do now?* He thought morosely. *How do I continue to serve this monster that destroyed my life? Yet, acknowledging this means acknowledging that I was once that man, the man who Padmé Naberrie loved, the man who loved her more than life itself.*

Vader ran a gloved hand over his scarred visage, feeling tired and confused. *Where are you, Padmé?* He thought. *Where have you been all these years?* The fact that she had been hiding from him was not surprising to Vader; after what he had done at Mustafar, he couldn't expect anything less. *So what makes you think she'd want you now after 20 years? Now that you are half a man?* Frustration and self-loathing filled Vader as he realized that even were he to find her, she would hate him with every ounce of strength she possessed. She had obviously gone to great lengths to make him and everyone else believe that she was dead. And what of the twins? Luke and Leia? Did they know if she was alive or not? Did they know of their own connection? They obviously did not know that Vader was their father; there was so much deception... Vader found that his head was pounding just thinking of all the possible ramifications.

First things first, he decided at last. *I must find the Rebels, I must claim my children, I must find their mother, and I must destroy the emperor. Short order...* he thought sardonically as he rubbed his eyes tiredly. He had been searching for the rebels for close to a year now and still couldn't find them. What made him think he could find Padmé if he couldn't find them? Deciding that he must sleep in order to wrestle with these problems, Vader closed his eyes, did his best to get comfortable, and willed himself to sleep.

Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5

Vader awoke with a start the next morning. He had dreamed of his wife that night, dreamed of her lying in his arms as they drifted off to sleep together, deeply in love, oblivious to the storm that was approaching, the storm that would destroy their lives.

The images of his dream only served to augment his depression. Even if he were able to find her, she would want none of him. How could he expect otherwise? He was a cyborg, not a man. No doubt she'd be afraid of the thing he had become.

As the helmet was lowered to his head, Vader found himself hating himself, hating what he has become, and for the first time, hating his master for enslaving him as he had.

A thought too painful to consider was taking form in his mind, one that would not be ignored. Vader knew that for certain now that Palpatine had lied to him about the manner of Padmé's death. Indeed, the very fact that he had told Vader that she was dead could very well be a lie. What else had he lied about? Had he also lied about the grievous injuries he had incurred at Mustafar?

Palpatine had assured Vader that the cybernetic limbs and artificial respiratory system were the only means by which he could live, and so Vader had believed him. As difficult as it had been to accept, Vader had done so. He had spent many nights in agony, both physical and emotional, as he mourned his lost humanity. But his master had told him that there was nothing to be done, and Vader had taken him at his word. Now, in light of the recent discoveries, Vader had to wonder if this too was a lie.

The cloners of Kamino had been creating human clones for nearly 3 decades. Surely if it were possible to create an entire human from DNA, then regenerating limbs and organs was also possible. *So why would my master lie about this?* Vader thought. The answer was all too simple: Darth Vader the man would be far less intimidating than Darth Vader the machine. So long as Vader was dependent upon artificial means to exist, Palpatine's hold on him remained strong, and Vader's hold on the Dark Side remained firm.

Vader felt the resentment and anger building within him as he submitted to the daily ablutions required to maintain his health and personal hygiene. He had always hated his inability to function as a normal human being, depending on droids and artificial means to perform the simplest, most basic of human functions. Now, in light of his suspicions regarding his injuries, he began to loathe it.

He looked at the droid as it assisted him with his feeding tube and rage filled him. Using the Force he threw it across the room, and it shattered against the wall. *I will not live like this* Vader thought angrily, yanking the feeding tube from his mask. *I will not be a machine any longer.*

Standing up and adjusting his mask and helmet, Vader strode out of his quarters, his purpose clear.

Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6

No one questioned Darth Vader's order to set heading beyond the Outer Rim to the planet Kamino. After all, the Empire's connection with Kamino was no secret; the cloners there had been making troops for the Empire for more than 20 years. The fact that no one openly questioned the order, however, did not mean that the men weren't talking about it.

"First Naboo, now Kamino," muttered Kendal Ozzel, Vader's second in command. "What the hell is wrong with him anyway? Has he finally lost his mind?"

Captain Piett merely shrugged in response, far too clever to voice an opinion one way or another. He had a great deal of admiration for Lord Vader, and knew that whatever reason he had for visiting these planets, they must be important. Piett also suspected that Ozzel resented Vader's presence on board the *Executor*, for without Vader, it would be Ozzel in command.

"I have half a mind to contact the emperor about all these erratic course changes," grumbled Ozzel. Piett merely smiled to himself. He knew Ozzel well enough to know that he was bluffing. He didn't have the nerve or the courage to do such a thing. Going behind Darth Vader's back was like signing your own death warrant, and Ozzel knew it.

It was no secret that Ozzel and Vader didn't see eye to eye. In fact, it was the admiral whose name was worth the highest number of credits in the death pool. He didn't know this of course, but Piett did. He had resisted the temptation to get in on that particular pool, thinking it unbecoming for an officer.

Piett actually got along remarkably well with Vader. He was one of the few men who seemed to understand the mysterious Sith Lord, and made an effort to speak to him as a person, rather than just as a faceless menace. He too was curious about the unusual orders the Dark Lord had been issuing lately, and wondered what the reason was.

Piett had pinpointed the change in Vader to the day when the spies had returned with the name of the rebel who had destroyed the Death Star. Piett had been by the Dark Lord's side when the name was uttered, and had seen the strong reaction it caused in Vader. Was there some significance to this name for Lord Vader? Obviously there was, for since that day he had been acting in an unusual, most obsessive fashion. Piett would never dare ask Vader what that significance was, for Lord Vader was intensely private. No one knew anything about his private life, if he had one, or about who the man under the mask was or had been at one time. Still, Piett couldn't help but wonder if this young rebel was connected to Vader's past, and if so, in what way. It was pointless to consider it however, the likelihood of Vader sharing that information was nil, and so Piett continued with his duties and followed his orders, no matter how bizarre they seemed to be.

The planet Kamino, beyond the Rishi Maze, was a stormy, aquatic world. Vader had not been here in many years, yet he remembered it well. The rows and rows of embryos had been a shocking sight for him, and he had not forgotten it. No doubt that without the clones created

here the Empire would never have been able to defeat the forces of the Republic. The warriors created here were efficient killing machines that never questioned orders.

“Piett, you’re with me,” Vader commanded as the *Executor* established orbit around the planet.

Piett looked up in mild surprise, but did not question the order. He stood up and accompanied Vader off the bridge and headed for the hangar bay. The two men did not speak as they walked along, Piett having to hurry to keep up to the long strides of the Dark Lord. Once inside the shuttle, Vader spoke.

“I selected you to come with me, Piett, because you are the only man on this ship that I trust,” Vader told him.

Piett looked over quickly at his commander, stunned by his words.

“I am honored, Lord Vader,” he replied at last. “And I assure you that your trust in me is well placed.”

Vader nodded his head as Piett piloted the ship out of the hangar. “My mission here is top secret,” Vader continued. “No one on board is to know what is going on. Whatever you see or hear, you are to say nothing to anyone, do you understand?”

“Completely, Lord Vader,” Piett replied at once, intrigued by the Dark Lord’s revelation. “May I ask what my job will be, my lord?”

“All in good time, Piett,” Vader replied enigmatically.

Piett nodded his understanding and returned his attention to piloting the shuttle to the planet below.

Chapter 7

CHAPTER 7

Vader wrapped his great cloak around the complex apparatus that covered his torso as he and Piett made their way to the entrance. Piett had wanted to run, to avoid getting soaked to the skin: but since Lord Vader didn't, he dutifully walked along side his commander, getting wetter and wetter with each step. *What a wretched place this is*, thought Piett as they finally entered the domed city.

"Pleasant weather," quipped Piett as he and Vader shook the rain from their clothing.

"Indeed," Vader responded. "It always is here." He looked up as he saw a tall slender figure approaching.

"Lord Vader," the female alien said in soft, musical tones. "It is a pleasure to see you after such a long absence. To what do we owe the honor of your presence?"

"I am here for personal reasons, Taun We," Vader replied, earning a curious glance from Piett. "And need to speak to your prime minister at once."

"Of course," Taun We replied. "Right this way."

Vader and Piett followed Taun We's graceful form as she led them through the brilliantly lit hallways of the city. Piett found the interior of the city to be in stark contrast to the planet surface, for it unusually bright; yet, there was an austerity to it, which reflected the people who inhabited it.

"Come in please, gentlemen," Taun We announced as she stepped aside and allowed them to enter an open doorway.

"Wait here," Vader commanded Piett. "And be sure that no one enters."

"Understood my lord," Piett replied. Secretly he was disappointed that he was not to be made privy to the reason Vader was here; surely a clone trooper would have served Vader's purpose just as well if this was all that was required of him. Piett sighed as the door slid shut behind him, his eyes watching the slender figure of Taun We as she sauntered away.

Vader stepped inside and were greeted by another alien, a male this time, who introduced himself as Lama Su, the prime minister. The room was sparsely furnished and incredibly bright, just as the corridors had been.

"How might I be of service, Lord Vader?" asked Lama Su as the two sat down on chairs suspended from the ceiling.

"I have come on personal business, Prime Minister," Vader replied.

The alien face registered a modicum of surprise. Little if anything was known of the private life of the Empire's most notorious man. Lama Su found himself intrigued.

"Personal business, my lord?" Lama Su asked, trying to be casual. "Of what nature?"

Vader hesitated before responding, trying to put the right words together. His request was rather unusual, and no doubt would shock the prime minister.

"I have decided to seek out medical attention to repair my... physical limitations," Vader replied at last.

"I see," Lama Su replied. "Surely you realize that this is not a medical facility, my lord."

Vader nodded. "Yes, I know that," he responded. "But you are masters of cloning."

"You wish to be *cloned* Lord Vader?" asked Lama Su in undisguised surprise.

"No, no not that," Vader replied at once. The very reason Palpatine had not cloned him in the first place was because midichlorians could not be replicated in the very manner that human flesh could be. Were he cloned; he would not retain his Force abilities. *And that was unthinkable...*

"Then I'm afraid I don't understand what it is you are asking," Lama Su admitted.

"Organ regeneration," Vader said at last. "Surely with the technology you possess that is something within your abilities."

Lama Su nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, yes I suppose it is," he replied. "You do realize however that such a procedure would take months, much longer than mere cloning."

"Yes, I realize that," Vader replied, secretly disappointed to hear it.

"And it would be extremely costly," Lama Su added.

"Price does not concern me," Vader replied. "My question is can you do it?"

Lama Su looked at the Dark Lord thoughtfully. *Why is this so important to him all of a sudden? Vader had lived with his cybernetic implants for years... no one quite knew how long... why was he all of a sudden interested in repairing those injuries when he could have done so years ago?*

"I believe so," Lama Su replied at last. 'Of course our physicians would need to do an extensive examination of you and your particular...needs,' he added. "Only then could we determine what, if anything could be done to help you."

"Yes, of course," Vader replied, trying not to get his hopes up. "I wish to proceed at once."

"Of course, my lord," Lama Su replied as he stood up. "I shall make the arrangements myself."

The two men left the room, finding Piett standing outside the door. He fell in step behind them, wondering where they were going and what was going on. This facility made clones; that much he knew. Was Lord Vader here to requisition more clones? No, such a mission would not be secret... so why were they here? Piett kept his questions to himself, knowing that Vader would reveal what he wanted when he wanted.

Lama Su led the two men to a complex medical facility. The lighting was incredibly bright, and Vader found it uncomfortable, even with his mask on. There were several aliens present, all of whom looked curiously at the enormous black clad figure who walked about their facility with their prime minister.

“Lord Vader,” Lama Su said at last, “this is our medical team. You will find them to be highly competent and utterly professional. I am sure that they will do everything they can to help you.”

Vader could sense the curiosity of the group of aliens before him. No doubt they were just as curious as he knew Piett was, despite the officer’s best efforts to hide his feelings.

“What can we do for you, Lord Vader?” asked the senior physician.

“I want to have the damaged parts of my body replaced,” he explained. “Your prime minister tells me that you can regenerate human tissue.”

“Yes my lord,” the physician replied. “So long as we have DNA from the original,” he added.

“You understand that this is long process, Lord Vader,” spoke up one of the others. “Growing new organs or limbs takes months, since we do not use the acceleration process used to create clones.”

“Yes, I know that,” Vader replied. “I am willing to wait. Can you do it?”

The doctors exchanged a look. “I believe we can,” one spoke up at last. “We will need to conduct an extensive examination of your injuries, of course, and run a battery of tests. Are you prepared to stay here for an extended period of time?”

“How long?” Vader asked.

“At least 48 hours,” one of the aliens replied. “Is that a problem?”

Vader looked at Piett, who stood in silent amazement by all that he had just heard. “You will return to the ship,” Vader ordered him. “I am counting on you to come up with a plausible reason why I have been detained here. Can you manage that?”

Piett nodded. “Of course, my lord,” he replied at once. “I will do what I must. Should I return for you two days hence?”

“I will contact you when I require you, Piett,” Vader responded. “You were wondering what your job is; now you know. Keep this secret, let no one know the true reason I am here, and keep Ozzel’s nose out of my business.”

Piett could not help but smile at the last comment. “It will be my pleasure, sir.”

Chapter 8

Darth Vader spent the next 2 hours being interviewed by the team of doctors. They asked him questions of every possible nature; his family history, his age, his health before his accident, the nature of his accident, the specialized equipment and treatments he required. It felt strange to divulge so much information about himself, for he rarely spoke about himself to anyone. Speaking about the past was particularly difficult for him; memories of Mustafar had always been painful for him, not just because of the physical injuries, but because of the memories of his wife, and what he had done to her that day.

Vader knew that the ensuing physical examinations would be unpleasant, but he had no idea how unpleasant. He had never been particularly tolerant of physicians, but since his injuries on Mustafar, he had been forced to develop at least a tolerance for them. His physical condition required a great deal of maintenance, and so he had learned to put up with their ministrations.

Having ensured that he was fitted with an oxygen mask and hooked up to a ventilator, the physicians assisted Vader as he removed the cumbersome armor and body suit that he was forced to live in. Vader could sense the physicians' shock upon seeing the extent of the damage that his body had incurred, and he began to wonder if this had been a big mistake. The damage was so extensive; how could they possibly repair all of it?

"Try to relax," one of the female aliens told him gently. "We need to take samples of your skin and blood. After that we will need to use a scope to see the extent of your internal damage. It won't be pleasant, I'm afraid, but we will give you a sedative to help you relax."

Vader could only nod. He stared up at the ceiling and submitted to the tests. The skin scrapings were not as bad as he thought, though certainly painful. Blood tests were something he was used to. The most difficult and invasive part of the tests was the chest tube insertion. For this they had sedated him and applied a local anesthetic, deeming it too dangerous to give him a general in his present delicate state.

"This won't hurt, but you might experience some unpleasant pressure," the doctor told him.

After cutting a small incision in the side of his chest, a tube containing a scope was inserted inside of him. The scope was connected to a computer console that provided a holographic image of the interior of Vader's chest cavity.

Unpleasant was an understatement... Vader thought darkly as he felt the foreign object being moved about within his chest. He summoned the power of the Force to calm him, realizing to his shock that he was using the Force as he had when he was a Jedi. *The Sith does not need calm, the Sith thrives on chaos, on passion...* Vader pushed the troubling thoughts from his mind and closed his eyes. Eventually the sedatives kicked in, and he drifted off to sleep.

“You are so beautiful,” I tell her softly. “So...beautiful...” and then I am in paradise again. I hold her body against mine as our mouths meet, the intensity of our kiss doubled since the previous day. It is as though there are no barriers to being together, she is not a senator, I am not a Jedi, and we are merely a man and a woman, driven by our need for one another.

Again, she is the one to put an end to our moment of abandon. She pulls back and looks at me, the uncertainty and confusion filling her luminous eyes.

“We can’t, Ani,” she says softly. “We just can’t. I’m sorry...”

I nod at her, knowing in my head that she is right, but feeling in my heart that we are meant to be together.

“I’m sorry, Padmé,” I tell her as I release her. “This time it was my doing, not yours.”

She smiles at me. “Well then we’re even I guess, aren’t we?” she says.

I smile back at her. “Yeah, I guess so.” For a moment we simply stand, not touching, but looking deeply into one another’s eyes, communicating silently the longing we dare not put into words.

The images of Vader’s dream caused him to wake up, agitated and desolate. He looked around to see that the physicians had left him for the time being, and were consulting on the other side of the room.

Vader looked up at the ceiling, trying to put the memories conjured up from his dream out of his mind. It was too painful to think of Padmé, too painful to think of what they’d had together. All that was lost now, forever lost, no matter what physical changes he underwent; for though he could remove the armor and mask, he would never be able to win back the trust of her again, not after Mustafar. *So what was the point of it all?* He wondered morosely. *Why even bother at all?* Because there was a chance... and even a chance was worth it all.

“Ah, you’re awake.”

Vader turned his head to look at the doctor by his side.

“Well?” Vader asked his voice raspy and weak without his vocabulator.

“I don’t need to tell you that the damage to your respiratory systems is extensive,” the doctor continued. “And is by far the greatest of your injuries.”

“I know that,” Vader replied. “Can you do anything?”

“Well, yes,” the doctor replied. “The limbs will be the easiest to replicate, and shouldn’t pose a problem. Skin is fairly easy to grow, though the replacement procedure is quite painful. As for your respiratory system, it can be fixed, but not without extensive, invasive surgery. Your lungs, pulmonary branch and esophagus are all seriously compromised, and will need to be regenerated.”

Vader nodded in understanding. “Is there a risk of fatality?” he asked.

“I have to be honest with you, Lord Vader,” he replied. “There is. The thoracic surgery is rather dangerous, but rest assured that the surgeons here are the best in the galaxy. But the

decision is yours. If you decide to do this, we will begin the replication process at once. It will take several months before we can perform surgery, however.”

Vader did not need to think about it. Anything would be better than continuing life as half a man, even if he risked death.

“Do it,” he said at last.

Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9

Piett arrived a few hours later, as per his commander's orders. He did not ask Lord Vader anything about what had gone on the planet surface, though the suspense was killing him. *Darth Vader without the mask... without the armor... Darth Vader the man...* Piett could not imagine what could have happened to Vader to cause him such grievous injuries. Who was the Dark Lord before those injuries? Had he always been the dark, menacing incarnation of evil? Somehow Piett suspected that the name Luke Skywalker was connected with Vader's past, and he was curious to know how. More than curious, this was a mystery better than any holovid. This was real, it was intense, and Piett was involved in it. Indirectly of course, but even that was something.

"Anything of importance to report, Piett?" Vader asked, shaking the captain from his musings.

"Nothing, my lord," replied Piett. "Our search of the Feriae System turned up no leads, I'm afraid."

Vader nodded his head. "Ten thousand probe droids, you would think one would have turned up something by now," he muttered.

"It's only been 5 months, my lord," Piett countered. "We may yet find them."

"We must find them," Vader replied. "The emperor is counting on it. I must not fail him again."

Piett did not reply, knowing that Lord Vader's reason for finding the rebels was far more personal than anyone realized. And Piett intended on finding out why.

Back on board the *Executor*, Vader did not return immediately to the bridge. His thoughts were elsewhere, however, and the pain of the still new incision in his chest was still aching. There was so much going through his mind; it made concentrating on his duties difficult. He could not appear distracted in front of his men, particularly not with Ozzel lurking about as he was prone to do. There were so many questions he still had no answers for, and Darth Vader was nothing if not tenacious. He had dealt with one issue; that was now in the hands of the good doctors of Kamino. The probe droids were all over the galaxy searching for any sign of the Rebel base, of his son and daughter. *But what of Padmé?* He thought as he sat in his meditation chamber. *How do I begin to look for her?* He knew her well enough to realize that wherever she was, she had ensured that he would never find her; so how did he hope to do so? Perhaps his children were the key to unlocking the mystery to their mother's whereabouts. Surely she had been in contact with them at least... hadn't she? *What if they have no idea where she is? What if they think she's dead? What if she is dead?* Vader's head began to ache with all the implications and questions his brain was bombarded with. *I need to sleep...* He decided. *I need a clear head to ponder these questions.* Closing the chamber, he removed his helmet, got as comfortable as he could, and fell into a restless, troubled sleep.

Firmus Piett had always loved a good mystery, and the one he was now involved in was certainly one of the best he'd ever known. Once he had finished his duties on the bridge, Piett retired to his own quarters. He activated the Imperial Net, and typed the name **Luke Skywalker** into a search engine. Within moments, a scant few sentences appeared, providing him with no more information that he already knew. Piett sat for a moment in thought. He highlighted the name Luke and deleted it, and then tried the search again, this time with only the name Skywalker. What he found both amazed and startled him.

Skywalker, Anakin

Place of birth: Tatooine

Date of birth: unknown, circa 42BBY

Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi Knight of the Old Republic, known throughout the galaxy as one of the best pilots and greatest warriors the galaxy has ever produced. Reputed to be the greatest of all the Jedi, Skywalker fought in the Clone Wars where he gained great notoriety for his cunning as a warrior and earned the moniker 'The Hero with No Fear'. Skywalker disappeared during the Jedi Purges, assumed dead.

A small holographic image of Anakin Skywalker accompanied the data, and Piett stared at the image, wondering if this was the face of the man under the mask. Was Skywalker a common name? Had it been Vader's name at one point in his life? Skywalker was a great Jedi; that would explain Vader's ability to manipulate the Force. So who was Luke Skywalker then? A relative? Piett felt certain that this was the key to Darth Vader's single minded obsession to finding the Rebels. This made Piett more determined than ever to help Vader, and do everything he could to track down the Rebels. Perhaps only then would the rest of this mystery be unraveled.

The weeks passed by slowly as the search for the rebels continued. Weeks turned into months, as the systematic, painstaking check of each system dragged on. So far, there had been very few leads, each one proving fruitless, and the crew of the *Executor* began to think that they were on a wild mynock chase.

On top of it all, Lord Vader's patience was wearing thin. His already short fuse seemed infinitely shorter, his temper far more incendiary, and his moods far more mercurial. The men tiptoed around him very carefully, not wishing to give the Dark Lord the slightest provocation to crush their larynx. Deaths were up alarmingly, the money exchanged in the death pool was changing hands at an equally alarming rate.

Vader knew that the men in his charge were getting impatient with the tedious search that he had ordered, but he didn't care. He had the emperor breathing down his neck, demanding nearly daily reports on his progress. This stress translated into more pressure on the men. In the food chain, the bottom of the order always gets the brunt of the abuse; this was no different. Only for Vader, there was more at stake than merely doing his duty to his master and emperor. He had already decided that once he found and claimed his children, his subservience to Palpatine would end, along with Palpatine's life. For now he needed his place in the Empire to carry out his own objectives; namely finding Luke, Leia and, he hoped, Padmé. *What happened after that...* well, he hadn't quite figured that out yet. The fact that his children despised him did not deter him. They did not know the truth, and once the truth was revealed to them, then everything would fall into place. At least, that's what Vader kept

telling himself. In reality, he had no idea how things would turn out, or how he would even win over his children after all that he had done. Perhaps he never would. But he owed it to them, to himself, and to Padmé to at least try. Vader had always acted on emotion, even as a boy; never giving a second thought to what the consequences of his actions would be. Emotions drove him; they still did; that was what made him so dangerous.

“Admiral!” called Piett as Ozzel and General Veers strolled onto the bridge.

Ozzel and Veers approached the station where the captain was standing. “Yes Captain?” Ozzel asked.

“I think we’ve got something sir!” Piett replied excitedly. “The report is only a fragment, from a probe droid in the Hoth System. But it’s the best lead we’ve had.”

Ozzel frowned, annoyed with the young officer’s exuberance over what he considered to be nothing. “We have thousands of probe droids searching the galaxy,” he retorted hotly. “I want proof, not leads!”

“The visuals indicate life readings!” Piett countered.

“It could mean anything!” Ozzel replied. “If we followed up every lead...”

“But sir,” Piett pointed out. “The Hoth System is supposed to be devoid of human forms.”

Piett stopped as he saw Lord Vader appear behind Ozzel.

“You found something?” Vader demanded.

“Yes my lord,” Piett replied, replaying the visual from the probe droid.

“That’s it!” Vader exclaimed. “The rebels are there!” He knew it, he could feel the presence of his children just looking at the visual... *they are there...*

Ozzel smiled condescendingly, as though speaking to a young child. “My lord,” he began. “There are...so many uncharted systems. It could be smugglers, it could be...”

But Vader would hear none of it, and cut him off abruptly. “*That* is the system,” he declared. ‘And I’m sure Skywalker is with them. Set your course for the Hoth System.’ He turned to Veers. “General Veers, prepare your men.” Vader strode away.

“Admiral,” Veers said with a nod in Ozzel’s direction.

Ozzel nodded back and then turned to Piett. The captain had to keep from smiling, so pleased was he with the annoyed look on Ozzel’s face. “Carry on,” Ozzel snapped and walked away. Piett watched him disappear from view, and then smiled.

Chapter 10

CHAPTER 10

The atmosphere on the bridge of the *Executor* was one of excitement and relief. The rebel base had finally been found. The Hoth System was in the Outer Rim, a desolate, lifeless collection of snow covered planets.

Admiral Ozzel strutted around the bridge, pleased that he had it to himself for a change. He walked about, checking the stations of each man, making a grand show of his authority, however short lived it may be. It actually rather surprised him that Lord Vader was not on the bridge as they closed in on the Hoth System, for Vader had been hell-bent on finding the rebels for close to a year now. No doubt he would want to personally be there when the rebels were apprehended. *Well let him...* Ozzel thought peevishly. *Snow and ice aren't terribly appealing to me.*

"Admiral, we are less than a quarter parsec away from the Hoth System," Piett announced. "Shall I commence the drop from light speed?"

"No, not yet, captain," Ozzel replied, to the surprise of everyone. General Veers, who stood by Piett's station, lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"But sir," Piett replied. "Much closer than this, and..."

"Are you questioning my orders, captain?" Ozzel shouted, his face turning red with rage.

Piett exchanged a quick glance with Veers, whose face remained passive.

"Of course not, sir," Piett replied.

"Good," Ozzel barked. 'Mind your place, Piett,' he warned. "You'd do well to remember who is in command of this ship."

Piett made no reply, but thought to himself how he wished Lord Vader could hear this particular conversation. He suspected it would not end well for the pompous admiral.

Darth Vader sat in his mediation chamber, brooding. The trip to Hoth seemed endless, though with each passing parsec he could feel the presence of his offspring growing stronger. Despite the fact that they had spent a lifetime apart from him, and did not even know of their true paternity, he could feel a connection with them through the Force. Luke's Force signature was by far the stronger of the two, and reminded him of his own, or how it had once been. He would be a powerful Sith, there was no doubt of it. As for the girl, she too exhibited Force abilities, though more unfocused. No doubt she had not received any training, as Luke had. *I thank you, Obi-Wan...* Vader thought cynically, enjoying the irony that Kenobi had begun to awaken the skills in his boy that would eventually enable Vader to turn him to the Dark Side.

Vader had been searching the Imperial Intelligence Network for weeks in search of any clue as to the whereabouts of the former Senator of Naboo. Aside from the biography that outlined her life in politics, as well as the footage of her state funeral, there was nothing. She

had disappeared, seemingly. *How does one find someone who does not wish to be found?* There was a time when the bond between them would have enabled him to find her, for despite the fact that she was not a Jedi, there had nonetheless existed a strong psychic bond between them. That bond was gone now, he realized bitterly. He had severed it irrevocably when he had tried to kill her on Mustafar. *Tried to kill her when she was carrying your children...* The memories of that dreadful day would haunt him forever. He had lashed out at her believing that she had betrayed him, but now he knew better. Now he knew that Kenobi had merely used her as a means to get to him. The guilt he felt over that day was sickening, and gave him one more reason to hate Palpatine for filling his mind with lies.

The door to Vader's chambers opened and General Veers stepped inside. Vader turned his chair to face the general.

"Yes, General, what is it?" Vader asked.

"My lord," he began, "the fleet has moved out of lightspeed. ComScan has detected an energy shield surrounding the 5th planet of the Hoth System. The shield is strong enough to deflect any bombardment."

Rage filled Vader. *Ozzel...* "The rebels are alerted to our presence. Adrmial Ozzel came out of lightspeed to close to the system," he rumbled angrily.

"He felt surprise was wiser..." suggested Veers tentatively, knowing that his friend would pay for this mistake with his life.

"He is as clumsy as he is stupid," Vader snapped. "General, prepare your troops for a surface attack."

"Yes, my lord," Veers replied, bowing and then leaving the Dark Lord's presence.

"I tell you, that this energy shield was there before we left hyperspace," Ozzel was insisting. "What exactly are you trying to imply, Piett?"

"I am not implying anything, sir," Piett replied calmly. "I'm merely telling you what the scans indicate. The energy signature from this shield is less than 24 hours old..."

Their discussion was interrupted by Lord Vader's image appearing on the com screen.

"Lord Vader!" Ozzel yelled, startled by his appearance. "The fleet has moved into lightspeed, and we are preparing to..." he stopped, as he felt the iron grip of invisible fingers grasp his windpipe. Piett looked on in horror as his commander gasped for air, his face turning blue.

"You have failed me for the last time, Admiral," Vader pronounced ominously. "Captain Piett."

Piett tore his eyes away from the horrible spectacle to face the Dark Lord. "Yes, Lord Vader?"

"Be ready to land our troops beyond their energy field and deploy the fleet so that nothing gets off that system. *You are in command now, Admiral Piett.*"

"Thank you, Lord Vader!" responded Piett as Ozzel collapsed to the floor, dead.

Vader sat back in his chair, pleased to be rid of Ozzel once and for all. *He had it coming for a long time*, Vader reflected. Having Piett as his second in command would certainly make things easier. Things were finally starting to fall into place, he reflected, as he headed for the bridge.

Chapter 11

CHAPTER 11

Vader paced up and down on the bridge, anxious to hear word from the planet surface. General Veers was a reliable officer, and Vader felt confident that he would have the shield down as soon as possible. The battle on the planet surface would not last long, of that Vader was certain. The rebel riffraff were no match for a team of ATAT's that was sure to be bearing down on them right now. *Is my son involved in this battle?* No doubt he would be... no doubt his piloting skills made him a leader of the squadron. *Like his father before him.*

"Lord Vader, a message coming in from the surface," Piett reported.

Vader stepped over to the comm. station and waited as Piett brought up the hologram of the general from the surface below.

"Lord Vader, we've reached the power generator. The shield will be down in moments. You may start your landing."

That was all Vader needed to hear.

"You are in command, Admiral," he told Piett as he strode away from the bridge.

The rebel base was in chaos when Vader arrived with his squadron of clone troopers. It was clear that the rebels were in full retreat, for people were running everywhere, klaxons were blaring loudly as the announcement "Imperial troops have entered the base!" was heard over and over. Vader ignored the cacophony of noise and focused on his children. *Where were they?* He felt the presence of one of them nearby, and headed in that direction, followed by the clone troopers.

Pieces of fallen ceiling impeded their progress as they made their way through the base, as well as snow dusted equipment that had been discarded in the retreat. Vader marched onward, flanked by his troopers, feeling the presence of one of his children very close by.

"Lord Vader, the hangar bay," one of the troopers reported. "This way."

Vader followed the troopers into an alcove that had been fashioned into a hangar bay. Inside of it was a small Corellian freighter. Judging by the dubious sound of the engines, the ship was having trouble taking off. *One of them is in there...* Vader thought to himself. *There is no doubt of it.* He reasoned that it was more than likely his daughter, as his son was undoubtedly involved in the battle going on outside. Princess Leia Organa was an important member of the Alliance, and obviously someone was trying to ensure that she was safely off the planet surface before she could be taken prisoner.

"Disable that ship," Vader ordered as the clones set up their laser cannon. But before they could fire one shot, the laser cannons of the freighter burst to life, spraying the group of troopers with deadly fire. Several more immediately ran over to take the place of their fallen comrades, not giving a second thought to the dead bodies at their feet. Just then the freighter

roared to life, soaring above the heads of the troopers and Vader himself who could only watch helplessly as the ship headed for open space.

Discouraged, Vader simply stared out at the patch of blue sky, trying to find his son within the chaos around him.

“What now, my lord?” asked one of the troopers.

“Find what stragglers you can,” Vader ordered. “Alive if possible.”

Vader made his way back to the shuttle. Over head rebel ships were flying in their effort to evade the invading imperial forces. *Where are you, Luke?* Vader wondered as he watched the x and y wings taking off one by one. *He is gone... I have missed him...* Vader realized morosely as he no longer felt the presence of either of his children on the planet surface. He continued on his way to the shuttle, his mind working furiously to come up with a plan to gather his children to himself. If they were split up now, his task would be doubly difficult; somehow he would have to bring them together even if it meant tricking them to do so.

“Report!” Vader barked as he entered the bridge.

The men at their stations jumped in their seats by the angry tone of his voice.

“90 percent of the rebel ships were able to evade us, my lord,” Piett reported nervously. “As you feared, my lord, they knew we were coming.”

“Obviously,” Vader rumbled, cursing the name of Ozzel yet again. ‘I want that Corellian freighter tracked,’ he commanded. “Find it, track it, never let it out of your sight, Piett. Am I making myself clear?”

Piett swallowed. “Perfectly, sir,” he replied. He then turned to his underling and relayed the Dark Lord’s orders.

Vader walked over to the large window and folded his arms over his chest, his gaze fixed on the stars as the ship moved away from the planet. *I will find you, my children*, he thought resolutely. *We are meant to be together... it is our destiny to be together. And when you have joined me in the glory of the Dark Side, we shall destroy the emperor and rule the galaxy together...*

Chapter 12

CHAPTER 12

So close... I was so close to both of them... and now they are gone... Vader brooded in his chamber. He had removed his mask and helmet to allow himself a brief respite. Earlier that day he had contacted the doctors on Kamino to receive and update on his 'project'. They had informed him that things were going slower than anticipated, but they would be ready to perform surgery within the next month.

Another month... Vader was hoping that he would be whole again when he met his children; that would make a difference, he was certain. They both knew the mask of Darth Vader, everyone in the galaxy did. *But the face of Anakin Skywalker...that was a different story.* Of course, he was *not* Anakin Skywalker anymore; but that wasn't important. He was their father, and soon he would claim him as their father. *And together, they would find Padmé, and there would be no stopping what they could do...*

Vader's ruminations were interrupted by the presence of someone in his quarters. He opened the chamber as the helmet was lowered onto his head, and turned to see Piett standing there. Judging by the uneasy look on his face, he had caught a glimpse of Vader's bare head. *Maybe now he will understand why I am so anxious to be remade..*

"Yes Admiral, what is it," he asked Piett.

"My lord, the Millennium Falcon has entered an asteroid field, and we cannot risk f.."

"Asteroids do not concern me, Admiral," Vader snapped. "I want that ship, and not excuses." He closed the chamber again, leaving Piett to find the elusive Falcon.

So into the asteroid field the *Executor* followed the renegade Falcon. Vader watched from the bridge as the tiny freighter dodged and weaved through the maze of floating boulders, and could not help but be impressed with the piloting skill of whoever was flying.

"Who is the captain of that vessel?" Vader asked as he continued to watch the ship.

Piett signaled to one of his underlings to bring up the registry on the Imperial Intelligence Net. "Last known owner of the Millennium Falcon," Piett read over the technician's shoulder. "Was Han Solo."

Vader nodded. The name was not familiar to him, but that didn't matter. There were ways of finding out what he needed to know. "Give me all the information you can about this Solo."

"At once, my lord," Piett replied immediately.

Vader crossed his arms over his chest, considering what manner of man this Han Solo must be to own such a dilapidated ship. Was this one of the men who he had seen escaping the Death Star with his children? The ship did look familiar... *yes; of course... it was the very ship the Death Star had caught in the tractor beam... the very ship that rescued the Princess*

Leia from the Death Star. Strangely, Vader felt gratitude for the rebel who had managed to steal her away before the Death Star was destroyed. Knowing that she was on board, his prisoner, when the space station was destroyed would have been too much to bear. *So where was Luke then? Was he to rendezvous with the other rebels? If so, where?*

“My lord, according to the Imperial records, Han Solo has been charged on several counts of smuggling,” Piett reported, shaking Vader from his thoughts. “Also rumored to be on the pay roll of Jabba the Hutt, a notorious gangster from the Outer Rim world of Tatooine.”

Yes, I know all about Jabba the Hut . reflected Vader. So Solo was a smuggler, a criminal... *so what was his daughter doing with the likes of him?* Vader shook his head as he realized that he had just had his first pang of paternal angst, and it shocked him. *Emotions must not get in the way of my plans... emotions are weakness...*

“My lord?” Piett said, wondering if Lord Vader had heard anything that he had said. “Yes, yes I heard you,” Vader replied, looking at Piett. “Continue your report.”

“There isn’t much else on the man,” Piett replied. “It does appear, however, that he owes Jabba a substantial amount of money, and has a bounty on his head of considerable size.”

“A bounty you say?” Vader replied, intrigued by this bit of information.

“Yes, my lord,” Piett replied.

Vader nodded his head thoughtfully. “Interesting...”

Piett did not understand what the dark lord meant, but did not question him, for his underling was calling him over to his station.

“What is it?” Piett asked the young officer.

“Sir, the Falcon has disappeared,” the young man said, looking up at Piett. “It appears to have entered into a cave or cavern of some sort in one of the larger asteroids.”

Piett frowned. “Send a squadron of TIE bombers at once to flush them out,” Piett ordered. “Then when they come running out, we’ll be ready for them.”

“Yes sir, right away,” the young man replied.

Several hours passed by with no sign of the Falcon. Vader had become so tired of waiting that he had engaged the services of bounty hunters in order to track down the renegade ship. Soon the bridge of the *Executor* was crawling with a motley collection of aliens, all looking dangerous and well seasoned.

Piett took it as a personal affront that Lord Vader had contracted the nefarious band. He was not about to tell Vader that, but muttered his disapproval amongst his underlings.

“Bounty hunters,” he grumbled. “We don’t need that scum.” he declared.

One of the young men looked up at him and simply replied, “yes sir,” and then returned to his screen.

“Those rebels won’t escape us,” Piett added, glancing up at a particularly nasty looking reptilian creature. It was staring at Piett, having heard his disparaging remarks, and uttered a string of suitable curses at the Admiral in his own tongue. Piett, though he had no idea what

the words meant, knew what the intent was nonetheless, and quickly backed away from the malevolent looking creature.

“Admiral, we have a priority signal from the Star Destroyer *Avenger*,” an officer announced as he entered the bridge.

“Right,” replied Piett, following the young man to receive the message.

“There will be a substantial reward for the one who finds the Millennium Falcon,” Vader was telling the group of mercenaries. “You are free to use any methods necessary, but I want them alive. NO disintegration,” he added, directing the comment at Boba Fett, the notorious of the lot.

“As you wish,” Fett replied mildly.

“My lord,” Piett called over to Vader as he hurried onto the bridge. “My lord, we have them!”

Chapter 13

CHAPTER 13

Vader could feel the adrenaline rush as he waited for word from the *Avenger*. At last he would have the Falcon in his possession, at last he would have his daughter... and once he had her, the son would soon follow. He had no doubt that though they may not know they were brother and sister, a connection existed between them. Luke would know it if his twin was in trouble. And while Vader had no intention of harming his child, *again*, just being in his custody would be enough to send shock waves through the Force. Luke would know, and then he would come for her. It was perfect.

"Report!" he demanded, impatient with waiting. It seemed that all he did anymore was wait, and Darth Vader was not a patient man, never had been.

"A message coming in from the *Avenger*, my lord," Piett reported as he watched the message on the com screen. It was not good news.

"It seems that the... uh... Falcon has disappeared again, my lord," Piett reported.

Vader stood without moving a muscle. *How is such incompetence possible?* He thought angrily.

"Who is responsible for this blunder?" Vader demanded angrily.

"Uh, Captain Lorth Needa is the commander of the *Avenger*, my lord," Piett replies.

"I want him on this bridge immediately!" Vader bellowed.

"I shall send word at once, my lord," Piett replied at once.

Vader had little patience for incompetence. He demanded excellence of himself, and no less for those who served under him. Needa's body was carried off the bridge a short time later, having had his windpipe crushed by Vader's invisible grasp.

"Lord Vader, we've done a thorough search of the area and found nothing," Piett reported. "If the Millennium Falcon went into light speed it will be on the other side of the galaxy by now."

"Alert all commands," Vader replied. "Calculate every possible destination along the last known trajectory."

"Don't worry sir," Piett responded confidently. "We'll find them."

"Don't fail me again, Admiral," Vader snapped, pointing a gloved finger at Piett for emphasis.

"Lord Vader!" called one of the junior officers as Vader was about to leave the bridge.

"What is it, lieutenant?" he asked.

"The emperor wishes you to make contact with him at once, sir," the young man replied.

Vader nodded. "Very well," he replied. "You have the bridge, Piett," he added as he swept off the bridge.

What do you want now old man? Vader thought in irritation as he strode to his quarters. He had made reports to Palpatine daily since finding the rebel base; what else could he possibly want to discuss? Unless... *he knows about Luke... he knows that my son lives.* The thought of Palpatine using his son angered him greatly. He wondered how or even if Palpatine would explain the existence of Vader's son. After all, it was Palpatine who had told Vader that Padmé was dead, dead while carrying Vader's child. Vader clenched his fists angrily as he approached his quarters. *You will pay for that, my master,* he thought darkly.

Vader entered his quarters and approached the large holographic imager. Closing his mind and his heart to the emperor's reach, he knelt before the image of the emperor as it materialized before him.

"What is thy bidding, my master?" He asked, using the ancient greeting of the Sith.

"There is a great disturbance in the Force," Palpatine intoned.

"I have felt it," Vader said simply.

"The young rebel who destroyed the Death Star. I have no doubt that this boy is the offspring of Anakin Skywalker," Palpatine continued.

Vader could feel his master probing his mind for a reaction, but Vader's control was strong, and managed to register only astonishment at the emperor's declaration.

"How is that possible?" Vader asked.

"Search your feelings, Lord Vader," Palpatine commanded condescendingly. "You will know it to be true. He could destroy us."

"He's just a boy," Vader countered. "Obi-Wan can no longer help him."

"The Force is strong with him. The son of Skywalker must not become a Jedi."

"If he could be turned he would become a powerful ally," Vader replied.

"Yes, he would be a great asset," Palpatine responded thoughtfully. "Can it be done?" he asked.

"He will join us or die, master," Vader replied, bowing low.

As the hologram flickered from sight, Vader felt the anger rise within him once again. *Search your feelings, Lord Vader... are you sure you want me to do that, old man? You may not like what I find there...*

Boba Fett contacted the *Executor* within 24 hours. He had managed to track the Millennium Falcon and calculated that they were heading for the planet Bespin. Vader immediately felt justified in engaging the services of the nefarious bounty hunter, and the *Executor* set off at once for the Bespin System.

The fourth planet of the Bespin System was a gas giant named for the star that bore the same name. Rich in tibanna gas, the planet Bespin had one of the most impressive examples of biosphere technology in the galaxy. The Life Zone as it was called enabled several large

city complexes to develop as the mining industry grew. The most notable and affluent of these cities was Cloud City, an enormous metropolis suspended by means of repulsorlifts above the multi-colored clouds of the planet far below it.

It was still dark when Darth Vader's shuttle arrived on a landing platform, the city was still asleep, but for one man who met them on the landing platform.

"What is the meaning of this?" the man demanded his hair still unruly from sleep.

"We have tracked a criminal to this facility," Vader responded, sweeping past the man. "That is all you need to know."

"Like hell!" the man shouted, running after Vader. "I'm Lando Calrissian, the administrator of this facility! I have a right to know what the Empire is doing here."

Vader stopped in his tracks, angered and annoyed by the audacity of the man. He turned slowly and faced him.

"Calrissian," rumbled Vader. "You ought to consider yourself lucky that this facility has not been annexed by the Empire. I understand you do quite a tidy business here."

Calrissian's dark eyes widened at this statement, and he began to grow fearful. "The Empire would have little use for us," he replied, his tone somewhat less confrontational. "We're a very small operation, not very self sufficient..."

Vader held up his gloved hand to prevent him from continuing. "Be that as it may," he began. "Should we encounter any lack of compliance, you will be out of a job, Administrator," Vader pronounced.

Calrissian stared at the Dark Lord, not sure if he was bluffing or if he was serious.

"I never bluff," Vader told him, reading his simple thoughts easily. He then turned and walked inside the city, leaving Calrissian behind to consider his limited options.

Chapter 14

CHAPTER 14

The Millennium Falcon arrived shortly after dawn. Calrissian was ready for him, and played his part perfectly, welcoming his old friend Han Solo with open arms and a big smile.

After his friends had been given a chance to freshen up after their long journey, Calrissian had arranged for them to have some lunch. He hated the way Vader had backed him into a corner, forcing him to betray his old friend. But what choice did he have? Vader didn't strike him as the type to brook dissent, and would no doubt follow through on his threats to fill the city with Imperial troops should Calrissian refuse to help. Still, that didn't make him feel any better, and when they stopped outside the room where Vader was waiting for them, it was all he could do to tell them to run like hell. He did not, however, and the door slid open to reveal the Dark Lord. Panic stricken, Han Solo drew his blaster and fired wildly in the direction of Vader, only to have each of his blasts deflected by the Dark Lord, and then his blaster yanked out of his hand by an invisible force and fly into Vader's outstretched hand.

"We would be honored if you would join us," Vader pronounced.

"I had no choice," Calrissian said miserably. "They arrived right before you did. I'm sorry."

Han looked down at Leia and took her hand. "I'm sorry too," he muttered. Then he and Leia, as well as the wookiee who acted as Solo's copilot, Chewbacca, entered the room where Vader was waiting for them.

"Be seated," Vader told them as the three entered the room. Solo and the princess glanced at each other, and then tentatively approached the table. His eyes were fixed on Leia, who bore such a striking resemblance to her mother that he felt his knees grow weak for an instant. *How could I not have known?*

"What do you want, Vader?" snapped Solo.

"I understand you have a substantial bounty on your head, Captain Solo," Vader began as Boba Fett stepped out of the shadows.

Solo frowned as he shot a hard look at the bounty hunter, and then back at Vader. "Is that what this is about?" he retorted. "What's the matter, Vader? The emperor cut up your credit cards?"

"Don't be an idiot," Vader snapped, beginning to wonder why he was trying to help this man. *Because an act of good will go far with your daughter...*

"Fett, you will escort Captain Solo to Jabba the Hutt," Vader continued, "pay him the amount owed, and return him here unharmed."

"That wasn't the deal, Vader!" Fett snarled.

"I have altered the deal," Vader retorted. 'If Jabba has a problem with it, then he can lodge a complaint. And as for you, bounty hunter,' Vader continued, facing him, "if you are not back here in 48 hours I will have a price put on *your* head. Am I making myself clear?"

Boba Fett nodded, not liking the turn of events, but knowing Vader well enough to realize that he wasn't one to make idle threats. What confused him the most, however, was why Vader demonstrating such benevolence where Solo was concerned. What did a smuggler turned rebel matter to him? He had a hidden agenda that much was clear; Fett couldn't imagine what it could be.

"48 hours Fett, no longer," Vader shouted at him as the bounty hunter escorted Solo and his wookiee sidekick out the door with the assistance of two clone troopers. Vader then turned his attention back to his daughter, who stood watching him with a mixture of hatred and shock.

"Sit," Vader commanded as he took a seat. Leia stared at him, still too afraid to sit too close, but utterly confused by what had just happened. Why *did* Vader care what happened to Han? Since when did Vader care about anyone but himself? Leia suspected that there was a method to his madness, and sat down to hear what he had to say.

"Get to the point, Vader," she spat. "I know you have an agenda of your own; otherwise you'd never have arranged to have Han's bounty paid. What do you want?"

To his utter shock, Vader found that he was nervous. He had this moment all planned out in his mind, right down to the eloquent words he would utter to reveal his true identity. But all these words evaporated from his brain as he sat in proximity to his child. Now that he knew she was his child, it seemed impossible that he couldn't have known it all along. She was the image of her mother, the same eyes, the same petite stature, the same proud carriage... *how could I have been so blind?*

"Tell me about your mother, Princess," he said at last.

His words could not have been more unexpected. "My... my *mother*?" she stammered, too shocked to come up with an acerbic comeback that had become her trademark.

"Yes," Vader replied. "What do you know about her? And I don't mean Breha Organa, I mean your birth mother. Your real mother."

Leia frowned, confused and unsettled by Vader's request. What possible reason could he have for asking her such a thing? Had he been responsible for her death? Was this just another one of his twisted methods of torture?

"Why should I tell you anything?" she spat, her anger growing.
"You aren't fit to utter her name."

The Princess' words bothered Vader more than he wanted to admit, only because she was right. He had no right to say her name, let alone know anything about her.

"Do you even know her name?" Vader asked.

Leia realized that she didn't, but did not wish to admit that to her enemy. She lowered her eyes, but only for a moment.
"I'm not telling you anything," she said.

“Padmé Naberrie, or Padmé Amidala as she was also known,” Vader continued, ignoring her comment. “That was her name, wasn’t it?”

Leia looked up at him, her dark eyes full of loathing. “How would you know anything about her?” she spat.

“Answer my question,” Vader replied evenly.

Leia wasn’t sure she could even if she wanted to. She had grown up in a loving household believing that Bail and Breha Organa were her parents. She was almost 9 years old before they told her that she was adopted, and only because she had overheard them talking late one night when she had awoken from a bad dream. She hadn’t heard most of what had been said, but there was one name she did remember, Padmé Amidala.

“I don’t know,” she said quietly, not looking at him. “I don’t know if that was her name.”

Vader did not respond, but merely nodded his head. Then he had an idea. “Come with me,” he said, standing up and taking her small hand. She yanked it out of his grasp, but came along with him nonetheless.

Calrissian was standing outside the door, and Vader suspected that he had been trying to overhear what was being said between Leia and him.

“I need a computer console with a link up to the Imperial network,” he told Calrissian.

Lando looked at Leia questioningly, but her face was impassive and revealed nothing to him.

“This way,” he replied, leading them to a small office down the corridor.

“Get out,” Vader said simply to the occupants of the office, who scrambled to their feet to do his bidding. He moved over to a computer console and accessed the Imperial Intelligence Network. Typing in his wife’s name, he brought up a holographic image of her. He stared at it for a moment, amazed by the effect it still had on him. Then he turned to Leia. Her eyes were wide as she stared at the image before her.

“Padmé,” Vader said simply, almost reverently. “Look familiar?”

Leia would have to be blind not to see the striking resemblance to herself, it was almost like looking into a mirror. She looked over at Vader, who was also staring at the image.

“She could be my mother, I suppose,” Leia said at last, trying not to let her emotions get in the way. *Inside she knew that this woman was her mother, she didn’t know how she knew, but there was no doubt in her mind or in her heart. But what did any of this have to do with Vader?*

“What is all this about, Vader?” Leia asked again, confused by his odd behavior. She had never seen him like this, so contemplative and quiet. “Why is this of any interest to you?”

Vader looked at his daughter, trying to put together the words he knew would tear her world apart. There was no easy way to tell her, no way to soften the blow of the dreadful truth he was about to reveal to her.

“I know because... because Padmé was my wife,” he told her at last.

Leia sat for a moment in stunned silence. Had she heard him correctly? *Surely not, surely she didn't hear him say that her mother had been his wife....that would make him her...*

"No," she said, stepping away suddenly, sending a nearby chair crashing to the floor. "You are lying! What kind of fool do you take me for to believe that?"

Vader stood up to face her. "I am not lying, Leia," he replied calmly. "Padmé was my wife. I haven't seen her in more than 20 years The emperor told me on the day that you were born that she had died giving birth to you. I know now that he lied, and I mean to make him pay for that."

Leia's mind was screaming in protest to all this information, trying to reject it, desperate to reject it... *Was this the terrible secret that her parents had kept from her all her life? That her greatest enemy, the most evil being the galaxy had ever spawned was in fact her father?*

"I don't believe any of this," she said, backing away from him, fighting to maintain her emotions. "I don't know why you are making this up, but I'm sure you must have some reason to do so."

Vader shook his head, frustrated with his child's stubbornness, which was so much like his own. "Why would I make this up?" he demanded. "What possible reason would I do such a thing? What advantage would it bring me?"

Leia could not reply to his questions, and so he continued. "We could do a blood test to prove what I have said is true," he suggested. "But I think if you are honest with yourself, if you look deep within yourself, you will see that I am telling the truth."

Leia shook her head as the tears came. "No," she said. "I won't believe it! It can't be! You can't be my father! How could such a... an inhuman monster be my father?"

So this is how it's to be? Vader realized morosely. So long as I am Vader, she will never accept me. Would she be willing to accept me were the mask gone? Would that make a difference?

Vader leaned down and typed something else into the search engine. Within seconds another image appeared that of a handsome young man who wore the robes of a Jedi Knight. "I was not always a monster, Leia," Vader told her.

Leia stared at the holographic image, feeling a strange feeling of connection with the man. She looked at the name under it. *Anakin Skywalker... Skywalker?*

"Luke is your twin brother," he told her simply, realizing that she recognized the name.

This was too much for Leia, too much information... she wanted to shut her mind off, erase all the data that it had just been bombarded with. It was too much; but looking at the image of the young Jedi, she knew that this man was Luke's father. The resemblance was undeniable, despite the fact that he was much taller and broader than Luke. They both had the same startling blue eyes, the same cleft in their chin...

But this man was not Vader, this man was young, and whole, and beautiful... she turned to Vader and looked at him contemptuously.

"I suppose you're trying to tell me that this is you?" she asked haughtily.

"It was," Vader replied. "As I once looked."

"Prove it," she retorted.

"What do you mean?" he asked, growing tired of her stubbornness.

"Take off your mask and show me," she challenged.

Vader shook his head. "You know I can't do that," He replied. "I will die without the mask."

"Yes, of course," she replied. "Well I think this is a bunch of garbage, Vader. Padmé may have been my mother, Luke may be my brother, and this man here may be our father; but you are *not* this man. This man is a Jedi, not a Sith. My mother would never have anything to do with a monster like you."

Vader sighed deeply, her words cutting him deeply. "No, she wouldn't," he replied softly. "Return to your quarters now, Leia," he said as he walked away from her.

He walked over to him and looked up at him defiantly. "That's all you've got is it?" she asked.

He looked down at her, but made no response.

"I don't know what you are trying to accomplish with this whole farce, Vader, but I can tell you it won't work," she said. "And don't even think about trying to convince Luke, I can guarantee that he won't believe word of it either."

Vader watched as his daughter was escorted down the corridor by a clone trooper. *I think perhaps he will, my daughter... in fact, I am counting on it.*

Chapter 15

CHAPTER 15

Vader sat in brooding silence, staring at the image of Anakin Skywalker. *If I look like him again, if I am remade and whole again, will that make a difference?* He wondered. Deep down inside he knew the answer to that question, and he hated to acknowledge it. *So long as you remain in the Darkness, your children will never accept you.* Vader closed his eyes as that terrible day on Mustafar jumped to mind.

Don't you see, we don't have to run away anymore! I have brought peace to the Republic. I am more powerful than the Chancellor. I can overthrow him, and together you and I can rule the galaxy. Make things the way we want them to be!

I don't believe what I'm hearing . . . Obi-Wan was right. You've changed.

I don't want to hear any more about Obi-Wan. The Jedi turned against me. Don't you turn against me.

I don't know you anymore. Anakin, you're breaking my heart. I'll never stop loving you, but you are going down a path I can't follow.

Because of Obi-Wan?

Because of what you've done . . . what you plan to do. Stop, stop now. Come back! I love you.

Liar!

No!

You're with him. You've betrayed me! You brought him here to kill me!

NO! Anakin. I swear... I...

And what did you do next? What did you do to her? Vader squeezed his eyes tightly, trying to blot out the image of his angel as she gasped for breath, feeling his iron grip upon her throat. For so many years Vader had managed to sublimate all those memories of the years when he was someone else. He had cut off all ties with those days, forsaking his name and all that he had once believed in in order to embrace the Dark Side. But now those images would not be held back. His children were proof that Anakin Skywalker had indeed existed. Vader was finally beginning to see the bitter irony that his life had become; he had rejected the name of Anakin Skywalker many years ago, and now he wished to claim the children of Anakin Skywalker as his own. By claiming them, must he not also claim his former self as well?

Vader clicked off the screen and stood up, leaving the room abruptly. He strode down the hall, trying to prepare for the arrival of his son, which he felt certain was imminent. It bothered him tremendously that he was now questioning the very fundamentals he had based his life on for the past 20 years. He had embraced the Dark Side fully, but what had he gained from it? In the beginning he had believed that the Dark Side was the only way to save Padmé, but that had not happened. *Indeed, wasn't it the Dark Side that had caused her to turn on her as he had?* He had offered her a place with him, ruling the galaxy, but she had rejected that offer. Despite loving him, she could not accept what he had become, even before the mask had been lowered onto his face. *What makes you think that your children will accept you if she could not? She who loved you?*

“Lord Vader!” Vader looked up from his ruminations to see a junior officer approaching him.

“What is it?” Vader replied.

“Skywalker’s ship has been spotted,” the officer reported. “He’s on his way.”

“Good,” Vader replied. “Monitor Skywalker and allow him to land.”

Vader had no idea what he was going to say to his son. He had foolishly believed that claiming his children would be simply a matter of telling them the truths that had been withheld from them for so long. His encounter with Leia proved this to be wrong.

“What do you want?” Leia asked warily as Vader entered her quarters.

“I thought you might be hungry,” Vader replied, setting down a tray of food.

Leia stared at the tray, and then back up at the Dark Lord. “Since when do you care how I feel?” she retorted, not wanting to admit that she was indeed starving.

Vader sat down across from her. “Since I found out that you are my child,” he replied simply.

Leia frowned. “You’re deluding yourself if you think I will ever believe that,” she said, trying to resist the aromas of the food in front of her.

Vader shrugged. “Perhaps,” he said. “Eat. I know you’re hungry.”

Leia grew annoyed at Vader’s uncanny ability to read her thoughts and very emotions.

“What happened to your droid?” Vader asked, noticing the box of parts that had once been C3PO.

Leia shook her head as she took a bite from the sandwich. “I don’t know,” she replied between mouthfuls. “Probably one of your stormtroopers took a pot shot at him for fun.” Vader picked up the droid’s golden head and looked at it thoughtfully. He had seen this particular droid with the princess before, and felt that he knew its designation.

“C3PO, isn’t it?” Vader asked, attaching the head to the metal torso.

Leia nodded, watching him warily. “What are you doing?” she asked tersely.

“Fixing him,” Vader replied. “You know I built this droid when I was a boy.”

Leia looked at him in disbelief. “You built C3PO? Oh come on now, Vader,” she replied.

“It’s true,” Vader replied, examining the damage on the droid’s right arm. “I built him for my mother, to help her.”

“You have a mother?” Leia asked in surprise. “Somehow I find that impossible to imagine.”

“Everyone has a mother, Leia,” Vader replied, the thoughts of his own immensely painful to him.

Leia watched the Dark Lord with a mixture of suspicion and shock. She had known Vader for years now, and had never seen any indication that under his armor and fearful mask there

was a human being. His actions both confused and surprised her. Still, she knew him well enough to know that Darth Vader did nothing without a reason; no doubt this was some sort of trap he was laying for her, luring her in as a spider lures a fly into its web.

"Why did you arrange to have Han's bounty paid?" she asked as he poked around in the box of parts, assembling the droid faster than she would have imagined possible.

"I know what the Hutts are like," he replied, his eyes not leaving his task. "They are not to be trifled with."

Leia nodded. "No, I don't imagine so... but that had nothing to do with you. Why do you care what happens to him?"

Vader looked up at his daughter. "Because *you* care," he replied simply, and then returned to her work.

Leia felt her face grow warm. Yes, she most certainly did care, even though she had not been brave enough to admit it, even to herself. Somehow Vader had been able to read that in her too; it frightened her how easily he could see her emotions... almost as if they were...

"I'd like to be alone now, if you don't mind," Leia said at last, standing up suddenly.

Vader looked up at her. "Do I make you uneasy?" he asked.

"No, I mean yes... well no. I just don't like the way you are trying to manipulate me," Leia replied. "And don't try to deny it. I know exactly what you are trying to do, and it won't work."

"What am I trying to do?" Vader asked, standing up as well.

"You're trying to make me think that you're human," Leia replied. "That you actually care about something other than yourself. I don't believe that, I will never believe that."

"Believe what you like, Princess," Vader returned. "That doesn't change the truth."

A chime was heard at the door, and Vader walked over to it. It slid open to reveal a young officer.

"Lord Vader, Skywalker has just landed," he reported.

"Good," Vader replied. "I will take the princess to the observation deck. See to it that he finds his way there."

"Very good, my lord," the man replied with a bow.

"What is going on?" Leia asked suspiciously as Vader approached her.

"You shall see soon enough," Vader replied. "Come with me."

"Luke is coming, isn't he?" she said. "You've lured him here, using me as bait, haven't you?"

She is strong with the Force... no doubt of it.

"He is coming," Vader replied simply as he strode along the empty corridor, his daughter almost running to keep up with him. "He has to know the truth."

“Do you think he will believe you any more than I do?” Leia retorted.

“Perhaps,” Vader replied simply. “If he is true to himself, and isn’t afraid to search his feelings, then he will. You are unwilling do that, Leia, that is why you will not believe.”

“I will *never* believe it,” she spat.

“There is more to this than you know, Leia,” Vader replied, turning to her. “I have reason to believe that your mother is alive.”

Leia’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Let her go, Vader.”

Vader and Leia both turned to see a young man holding a lightsaber in front of him, his eyes boring into the Dark Lord. *So we meet at last, my son...* Vader thought to himself.

“Luke!” Leia exclaimed, overjoyed to see him.

“Stay back, Leia,” Luke warned her, not taking his eyes from Vader for a second. “Are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

“No, Luke I’m fine,” she said, rather amazed at the realization of it herself.

“Good, now get out of here, Leia,” her twin cautioned. “Run. This is between me and Vader.”

Leia was torn, not knowing what to do. Surely Luke was no match for Darth Vader; but if what Vader had said was true, would he engage his own son in a deadly lightsaber duel?

“He is right, Leia,” Vader spoke at last, revealing his own lightsaber. “This is between him and me.”

Leia’s initial reaction to Vader’s comment was one of shock. She had expected him to use her as a human shield when Luke appeared; but he did not. Not only that, he encouraged her to flee.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said adamantly.

“Leia, I’m serious!” Luke warned as he and Vader circled one another.

She backed off as Luke stepped forward, lunging at the Dark Lord, who parried his blade with ease. Leia could see that Vader was holding back, for his skill was legendary with the lightsaber. Leia hated feeling helpless this way, but didn’t know what to do. Part of her wanted to run away, escape and never look back... part of her felt compelled to stay...all she could do was watch as the two warriors fought in front of her, their blades crashing and sparking, slashing against the white pristine walls.

“Your skills are most impressive, young one,” Vader commented.

Luke scowled at him. “You’ll find I’m just full of surprises,” he countered, moving in for another thrust. Vader stepped aside easily, and repelled Luke once again, forcing him to retreat up the corridor.

“Yes, I too,” he commented. Luke backed up, not taking his eyes off of Vader for a second, as the Dark Lord pressed his advantage. Vader had no desire to fight his son, the boy was

clearly not nearly skilled enough to face such an experienced opponent; but then he could not let Luke think that he was weak. If he ever hoped to lure Luke to the Dark Side, he must show his son the true nature and power the Dark Side represented.

Leia watched until she could see them no further, and then an idea struck her. She ran off in the opposite direction, determined not to let Vader win.

"I sense great anger in you, young Skywalker," Vader taunted. "Anger makes you powerful; don't be afraid to use it!"

Luke frowned, remembering the teachings of Master Yoda, who had warned him of the dangers of the Dark Side.

"No," Luke countered. "I will never succumb to the same temptations you did, Vader," he spat. "I am a Jedi, like my father before me!"

"Foolish boy," Vader retorted. "If you only knew the truth!"

"What do you know of truth, Vader?" Luke countered, pushing the Dark Lord's blade away. "You know of nothing but lies and deception, turning on your own kind and betraying them all to the Empire."

"I see someone has filled your head with their own version of the truth," Vader replied angrily, knowing that it was Obi-Wan who had undoubtedly already sewn the seeds of hatred in his son. "Are you so certain that all you believe is true? Have you never wondered why no one would ever tell you about your parentage? Not even Obi-Wan?"

Luke frowned at the mention of his mentor's name, the mentor that he had watched Vader slay. "He told me all I needed to know," he replied in a voice full of hatred. "He told me how you betrayed and murdered my father!"

"No Luke, I *am* your father," Vader replied calmly.

Luke shook his head. "No, no... that's not true," he shot back. "That's impossible!"

"Search your feelings; you know it to be true!" Vader retorted.

"Don't listen to him, Luke."

Vader snapped his head up to see Leia standing in the corridor behind Luke, a blaster aimed squarely at Vader's chest.

"Drop it," she ordered, her hands trembling with the adrenaline rush surging through her.

Vader did not drop his weapon, but stood back, watching his two children. *This didn't exactly go as planned...* he thought bitterly.

"Back away, Vader," Leia said, her voice deadly calm. "I won't hesitate to kill you."

Vader was stunned by this unexpected turn of events. If he capitulated, then both of his children would escape. If he didn't, then she would shoot him... if he deflected her blast, Luke would attack him with his lightsaber. No matter what he did, he lost.

"You may run away now," Vader said, addressing both of them. "But you cannot escape the truth."

“Don’t *listen* to him, Luke!” Leia shouted again, her teeth clenched. Luke glanced over at Leia, confused by her anger and adamancy.

“Leia?” Luke asked. “What is it? What did he tell you?”

“The same thing he told you,” Leia replied. “He claims that we are twins, you and I, and that he is our father.”

Luke looked back at Vader with shock. “What? How? How can this be?” he stammered, frantic to know the truth. Vader saw that his son was desperate for answers, and stepped toward him once again.

Leia did not hesitate for a moment, and shot Vader, hitting him square in the chest. Vader stumbled back; shocked that she would follow through with her threat. He looked down at the hole in his chest plate that smoked and sparked with destroyed circuitry. *Not good...* he thought. He felt himself growing lightheaded as his oxygen supply started to wane, and could only watch as his children ran from him, without so much as a backwards glance.

Chapter 16

CHAPTER 16

Admiral Piett was not a Jedi, nor gifted with the powers of precognition that those legendary beings were renowned to have. Yet, when the shuttle landed in the hangar bay, he had a sinking feeling that something was wrong. Usually Lord Vader was striding down the ramp before it had fully touched ground; but this time was an exception. When the Dark Lord had not appeared moments after the ramp had hit the hangar bay floor, Piett himself decided to see what was going on.

“Lord Vader?” Piett called as he boarded the shuttle. “Lord Vader, are you here?” He walked into the cockpit and stopped at the sight before him. He rushed over to the enormous figure slumped over the controls of the shuttle.

“Lord Vader!” he shouted, trying with all his strength to pull his commander’s inert form from the console.

Piett was relieved to see that Vader was alive, for the sound of his breathing could still be heard. But there was something wrong, for its regular, consistent rhythm was off, as though the equipment his lungs required to function had been compromised.

“Lord Vader! Can you hear me?” Piett cried. His eyes fell upon the damaged control panel on the Dark Lord’s chest. Piett panicked, not knowing what to do.

“Bridge, this is Piett,” he shouted into the comm. “I’m on board Lord Vader’s shuttle. He has been injured, and needs immediate medical attention. Get a team here on the double!”

“At once, Admiral!” he heard a voice reply. “Sir, the Millennium Falcon has emerged from the Cloud City. Should we open fire?”

Piett looked down at the Dark Lord who was struggling to breathe. *What would you have me do, my lord?* He wondered anxiously, feeling the weight of command crushing him.

“No,” Piett decided. ‘Put a tractor beam on them,’ he ordered. “Bring them in, unharmed.”

“At once, Admiral.”

Piett heard the medical team entering the shuttle and stepped aside for them to reach their patient. In very quick order, the medics had placed Lord Vader on a suspended stretcher.

“His breathing apparatus has been compromised,” Piett pointed out. “He will die soon if it isn’t fixed.”

The medics nodded. “We aren’t equipped to make repairs of that complexity, Admiral,” one of them stated. “He will need to be taken to a facility where such repairs are possible, and I would suggest if he doesn’t get the attention he needs within 24 hours, he won’t survive.”

Piett nodded in understanding, watching the medics lead the still unconscious Sith Lord away. He made his way to the bridge, all the while his mind working frantically to find a

solution to this complex and potentially deadly situation. And then it came to him.

“Report,” he called as he entered the bridge.

“The Millennium Falcon is in our custody, Admiral,” a young captain replied. “The prisoners on board have been taken to the detention block.”

“Very good,” Piett nodded. “Then prepare to leave orbit at once. Make your heading for the planet Kamino. Maximum velocity.”

“At once, Admiral.”

“I am going to interrogate the prisoners,” Piett continued, leaving the bridge once again.

Piett made his way to the lower levels of the star destroyer where the detention block was located.

“I’m here to see the prisoners,” Piett told the detention block commander.

“Right this way sir,” the officer replied, stepping out from behind the console.

Piett followed the officer down the corridor to the cell where the prisoners were being held. The officer keyed in the code for the door and it slid open. Piett stepped by him and into the room, where a young man and a young woman were sitting side by side. They looked up when they heard the door open.

“I am Firmus Piett, in temporary command of this vessel,” Piett began, looking at the two prisoners.

“What is it you want from us, anyway?” the young woman spoke up boldly. “Why are we being held prisoner?”

“Princess Leia Organa, isn’t it?” Piett asked, looking at her.

Leia merely nodded.

“Well Princess, surely you realize that you are a dangerous enemy of the Empire,” Piett replied mildly. ‘As is your companion here,’ he added, looking at Luke. “Skywalker, isn’t it?”

Luke nodded, his blue eyes regarding Piett warily.

“We’re here because of Vader, aren’t we?” Leia asked. “It was his order that brought us here.”

“Actually, it was mine,” Piett replied, folding his arms over his chest. “Lord Vader was injured while in the Cloud City. I don’t suppose either of you know anything about that?”

Leia and Luke exchanged a quick look.

“Is he dead?” Leia asked.

Piett frowned. “No, not yet at least,” he replied. “But if he doesn’t receive the proper medical attention soon, he will be.”

“Pity,” Leia put in coldly.

“So what do you want from us, anyway?” Luke asked at this point.

"I will let Lord Vader tell you that," Piett replied, turning to leave.

"We know what he wants," Leia replied. "We already heard all his lies."

Piett turned back. "Lies?" he asked, his curiosity peaked. "What lies would they be?"

"Don't tell him anything, Leia," Luke told his sister. "He's trying to trick us."

Piett frowned. "I have a theory about Lord Vader's interest in you, Skywalker," he stated. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Do I have a choice?" Luke retorted sarcastically.

Piett only smiled in response. "Of course, if you'd rather not hear it," he said, turning to leave.

"Tell us what you think you know," Luke called, his own desperate need for answers dictating his actions.

Piett turned back to the two. "Have you ever heard of the Jedi hero Anakin Skywalker?" he asked.

Both Luke and Leia were taken aback by the question.

"Yes, we have," Leia answered carefully. "What do you know about him?"

"Not a lot," replied Piett, "only what little information there is on the Imperial Net about him, plus my own memories of him."

"You remember him?" Luke asked in amazement.

Piett nodded. "Oh yes, he was a great hero during the Clone Wars," replied, seeing that he had piqued the young man's interest. "He was your father, surely you know that," he asked Luke pointedly.

Luke looked over at his sister, unsure how to respond.

"I don't know," Luke replied at last, looking down at his feet. "I was never told much about my father, actually."

Piett nodded. "Interesting," he replied. "I wonder why that is."

"Whatever your plan is, it won't work," Leia spoke up at last, seeing that Luke's curiosity about his father was clouding his judgment. "I'll bet that Vader isn't injured at all, and sent you in here to pump us for information. He's probably watching us right now."

"I can assure you that is not that case," Piett replied, amazed by the young woman's coldness. "Would you like me to prove it to you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Luke.

"I will take you to see Lord Vader," Piett replied. "To prove that he truly is fighting for his life. Would that satisfy your suspicions?"

Luke and Leia looked at one another.

"Yes, I suppose it would," Leia replied.

Piett nodded. "Very well then, I shall arrange it. I'll return within the hour."

He turned and left the room.

"Why did you agree to see him?" Luke asked Leia. "I would think you'd never want to see him again."

Leia wasn't sure how to reply. *Was it morbid curiosity? The thought of seeing the mighty Lord Vader fighting for his life was rather intriguing... she had dreamed of his death, never imagining that she would have a hand in it.*

"I guess I just want to be sure that he's not lying," she replied lamely.

Luke looked at her closely. His own thoughts had been on nothing but the unexpected and dramatic encounter with Vader in Cloud City ever since their hasty escape. He hated to admit it to her, and even less to himself, that on some levels he believed Vader. He couldn't explain it, couldn't even understand it; but he could *feel* the truth in what the Dark Lord had said. And Vader was right; all his life the topic of his parents was a taboo subject in the Lars household. How many times had he asked his guardians about them, only to be put off by some flimsy excuse? Even Obi-Wan had been openly reluctant to discuss Luke's father. Was this the reason why? Could it be true?

"Luke, don't tell me you actually believe what he said," Leia said, as though she could read Luke's mind.

Luke looked up at her. "I don't know what to believe, Leia," he said softly.

Leia stood up and started pacing around the room. "I will *never* believe it," she spat. "Never!"

Luke watched her, sensing the great feelings of conflict within her that mirrored his own. She had greater reason than anyone to hate Vader; he had stood idly by while her home world had been annihilated, killing the only people Leia had ever considered parents. But under that hatred, under the indignation and outrage that he sensed in her in tremendous amounts, was the fear that Vader was telling the truth.

"Did your parents ever tell you about your *real* parents?" Luke asked her.

She stopped in her tracks and looked at him, not wishing to answer his question. "No, not really," she answered simply. "But that doesn't mean anything."

"No," he concurred. "How old were you when you found out you were adopted?"

"I was 9," she remembered aloud. "I overheard them talking one night. I was coming to their room because I'd had a nightmare, and I heard them talking about me, asking each other if they thought it was time to let me know, about how Padmé would have wanted me to know about her real parents some day..." Leia stopped as the face of her birth mother came to her mind.

"Padmé?" Luke asked. "Who is that?"

"That's the name of my real mother," Leia replied. "The name of the woman Vader claims was his wife."

Luke frowned. "So that would make her...my mother too..." he said more to himself than to her.

Leia sat down beside him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Stop it Luke," she admonished. 'Don't let yourself be fooled by his sob story! He's manipulating us both with all this nonsense. None of it is true!'

"I wish I could be so sure," Luke replied, running a hand through his tousled hair. "I just can't help but feel the truth in what he is saying, Leia. I know it's crazy, but..."

Luke's sentence was cut short by the reappearance of Firmus Piett.

"Shall we?" he asked as he gestured to the door.

Luke and Leia stood up and made their way to the door. Outside in the corridor were two stormtroopers, waiting to escort the pair to the sick bay.

"This way," Piett said, leading the group out of the detention block.

Chapter 17

CHAPTER 17

Though Darth Vader's body was unconscious, his mind was not. He only wished it was, for he was tortured by images and memories that bombarded him as he lie there, helpless to prevent their onslaught.

The faces of countless younglings begging for mercy... Padmé pleading with him to run away with her, to turn away from the path of Darkness... Padmé lying unconscious on the landing platform... the agony as the fires consumed his body, lying abandoned and mutilated on the sands of Mustafar... the tortured screams of his daughter as the mind probe delved ever further into her mind...her agony as she watched her home world was blown into a billion bits of space dust..

Amid the chaotic visions a face emerged, his voice speaking softly but in a commanding tone

Anakin, listen to me.

I am not Anakin... that name means nothing to me..

I don't believe you... If it meant nothing to you, your children wouldn't mean anything to you either.

They are mine...

They will never accept you, so long as you remain in the Darkness, you know this, Anakin.

Don't call me that! Anakin Skywalker was a weak fool!

I know you don't believe that. Look into your heart, Anakin. The man you truly are is still there, if only you would set him free from the Darkness.

The Darkness is what makes me strong— it is all that I have.

That is not true, Anakin. The Darkness has given you nothing but pain, and has kept you enslaved for the last 20 years. If you are true to yourself, you will know that I am right.

Leave me alone! I don't need you, Qui-Gon Jinn! I don't need anyone!

Yes you do, Anakin... you need your children. And the only way to get them to accept you is to abandon the Darkness. You have already begun to abandon it, and you don't even realize it.

You lie.

Why else did you show benevolence to Solo? Why else did you spare your daughter's life when she was in your clutches?

I don't know why...

I think you do... you did it because Anakin Skywalker is fighting to overcome the Darkness.

You lie!

Neither Luke nor Leia were prepared for the sight that they beheld upon reaching the sick bay.

Darth Vader was lying prone on a bed, his body hooked up to a number of machines, and he seemed to be on complete life support. Both were shocked to see that his mask and helmet had been removed, but his face was obscured by the ventilator mask that had been fitted over his mouth and nose to enable his lungs to function. His bare head was bald, his skin was very white, and bore several vicious looking scars.

Luke and Leia could only stand by and stare at the unconscious Sith Lord, too stunned to speak.

Piett watched the pair, wondering what was going on through their minds. Did seeing the menacing Dark Lord weak and vulnerable somehow make him seem more human to them? He knew that they still harbored serious doubts about Vader's claim that he was their father; but Pielt knew better. He had seen the obsession that had taken over Vader since learning of Luke Skywalker's existence. He had never known Darth Vader to be so single minded to the point of ignoring all else, including directives from his emperor.

"Has he regained consciousness?" Pielt asked the medical droid attending Vader.

"He has brief moments of semi-consciousness," the droid replied. "But hasn't spoken, as you can imagine. He does, however, have moments of agitation, which has kept his blood pressure elevated."

Pielt frowned. "Agitation? What do you mean? Is he in pain?"

"He doesn't appear to be," the droid continued. "We have him so heavily sedated he should not feel any pain."

"He's emotionally agitated," Luke said at this point, his eyes on the figure of the unconscious Dark Lord.

Pielt and Leia both turned to him. "How do you know that?" Pielt asked.

"I can feel it," Luke said. "I can feel his emotions..." he added, a frown forming on his brow at the realizing of what this could possibly mean.

"You can *feel* his emotions?" Pielt asked. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know," Luke replied quietly. "I don't think I want to know."

Leia looked up at him, knowing exactly what he was talking about, for she too could sense the storm of emotions that raged through Vader. She had tried to ignore it, tried to pretend she didn't feel it; but it was too strong, the connection was undeniable. *No, this can't be happening... this can't be true...*

"What can we do?" Pielt asked.

"I don't know," Luke replied. "What are they doing to repair his breathing apparatus?"

“Nothing,” Piett replied, folding his arms over his chest and looking down at Vader. “There is nothing we can do here. We are under way to Kamino right now. He will get medical attention there.”

“Kamino?” echoed Leia. “You mean the cloners’ planet?”

Piett nodded. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“What can they do for him?” Luke asked. “You don’t plan on having him cloned do you?”

“No,” Piett replied at once. “I cannot disclose what will happen there, Lord Vader has sworn me to secrecy.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another. “So we are to disclose information to you, but you won’t reciprocate, is that it?” Leia asked pointedly.

Piett looked at the princess, and considered her words. Surely if these were Vader’s children then they could be told... *but if they weren’t... they were still members of the Rebel Alliance, and enemies of the Empire, and of Vader... what could they do with such knowledge?*

“I’m surprised you would even want to know, Princess,” Piett replied at last. “After all, you haven’t shown anything but disdain for your father.”

“He is *not* my father!” Leia shouted. “I don’t care what he told you, what you believe— he is not my father, nor is he Luke’s father. Do you understand, Admiral?”

Piett lifted an eyebrow, amused by the young woman’s outburst. *She’s more like her father than she knows...*

“Well, we will be arriving at Kamino soon enough,” Piett said, preparing to leave. “You will just have to wait until then to find out what Lord Vader’s plan is.”

Piett left the twins then, ensuring that two clone troopers were posted outside the sickbay doors.

“You feel it too, don’t you Leia?” Luke asked, stepping closer to the bed where Vader lie.

“I don’t feel anything,” she lied, folding her arms over her chest resolutely.

Luke glanced back at her. “I don’t believe you,” he replied simply.

Leia turned her dark eyes to his, frowning at him. “Luke, when have you ever known me to lie to you?”

“Never,” he replied. “But I think in this case you are lying more to yourself than to anyone else.”

“You... you believe what Vader said, don’t you?” she asked, her anger growing. “You really believe he is our father!”

Luke sighed, looking back at Vader. “I don’t know what I believe, Leia,” he replied softly. “I only know what I feel. And right now I feel his conflict, his torment... his guilt,” he added, looking back at Leia.

“Guilt?” she asked. “Now I know you’re delusional, Luke. Since when does Darth Vader ever feel guilt for anything?”

“Darth Vader wouldn’t,” Luke conceded. “But Anakin Skywalker would.”

Leia looked at her brother; her own emotions too conflicted to think straight.

“It can’t be true, Luke,” she said at last, her voice hushed. ‘It can’t be true! How can this... this monster be our father?’

“He wasn’t always a monster, Leia,” Luke replied, working it out in his own mind as he shared his thoughts with her. “According to Piett, Anakin Skywalker was a hero, a great Jedi knight. Do you think our mother would have married a monster?”

The mention of their mother made Leia recall the comment Vader had made just before Luke had appeared back on the Cloud City.

“He said he thought she might be alive,” Leia said, looking down at the Dark Lord.

“Who? Our mother?” Luke asked.

She nodded. “Yes,” she replied. ‘I don’t know what made him think so, and I didn’t have time to ask before you showed up.’ She looked up at Luke. “Do you think it’s possible?”

“Anything is possible, Leia,” he replied. ‘In the past 24 hours I have found out that I have a twin sister,’ he said, smiling at her. “And that my father...may be alive. If that is true, then it’s very possible that she is too.”

“I wonder if he’s been looking for her too,” Leia wondered aloud.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin looking,” Luke admitted. “I don’t even know what she looked like. Do you?”

Leia nodded. “Yes, he showed me her image,” she told him. “She was beautiful, Luke. Just as I always imagined her to be.”

Luke looked back at Vader. “I think he is more Anakin Skywalker than he wants to admit,” he commented softly. “I have so many questions I need to ask him, Leia; there is so much I need to know. I only wish he could speak to us now.”

Leia came up and put her hand on Luke’s shoulder. “Don’t get your hopes up, Luke,” she cautioned him gently. “This could all be an elaborate plot to gain our trust. Remember what he did to Obi-Wan, to Alderaan... we can’t trust him, Luke. Please don’t let your desire to know your father cloud your judgment.”

Luke turned and gave Leia a hard look. “Give me a little credit, Leia,” he retorted. “I’m not a child.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that you were,” Leia replied. “I’m just concerned that you are being far too accepting of this whole thing.”

“How can you say that?” Luke retorted. “Don’t you think this is tearing me up too? You think the thought that Darth Vader may in fact be my father isn’t horrifying to me?”

“I don’t know, I’m so confused right I don’t know what to think,” she replied miserably.

Luke relented, and walked over to his twin. He took her hands in his own. "Listen to me, Leia; I am as confused as you are. This whole thing is a nightmare. But I cannot ignore the feelings I have, feeling that I know you share. Whatever happens, whatever the truth may be, we have to be strong for each other, Leia. I know you can do that, for you are one of the strongest people I know."

Leia looked down at her brother's hand entwined with hers. "I will try, Luke," she said quietly. "But right now I don't feel very strong."

Luke smiled at her. "I know you don't," he replied. "And neither do I. But at least we're in this together, right? At least we have each other."

Leia nodded and they hugged one another tightly, unaware that they were being watched by a pair of striking blue eyes from across the room.

Chapter 18

CHAPTER 18

Vader was awake, and trying to listen to the exchange going on between his children. The drugs in his bloodstream made it difficult for him to concentrate, but from what he sensed, it seemed as though his son was far more accepting of the situation than his daughter. *That wasn't too surprising considering the history he shared with her... had his gesture of goodwill towards Solo meant nothing then? Apparently not enough...*

Luke looked over and saw that Vader's eyes were open, and turned back to his twin, said something to her, and then come over to his father's side. Vader followed his son's movements with his eyes, examining him closely now.

"Can you hear me?" Luke asked him.

Vader could not speak, but nodded in response.

"Leia is here," Luke said, making an awkward gesture towards his twin, who refused to step a centimeter closer to her father's bedside.

Vader's eyes moved to where Leia was. She was watching him, secretly astonished at how much like Luke's eyes Vader's were. He looked at her for a long moment before she turned her eyes away.

"I... I don't know what I'm supposed to say right now," Luke admitted. "This is a rather unique situation we've found ourselves in."

Vader looked back up at Luke, knowing how uneasy his boy was. He wished he could speak to him now, to answer all the questions that he knew the young man was burning to ask. *Will it make any difference once he knows the truth?* Vader wondered as he examined his son's face.

"Leia told me how you arranged to have Han's bounty paid," Luke continued. "Perhaps if I'd known that earlier, this might have been avoided."

Vader was surprised by his son's words, and oddly encouraged. His son seemed so much more willing to communicate with Vader, his feelings like an open book. Not like Leia. She had closed her feelings off from him completely, and it unnerved him how much he was reminded of himself in her stubborn, unyielding bearing.

"Admiral Piett has told us that we are going to Kamino," Luke continued. "But wouldn't tell us why. He is very loyal to you."

I need your help, Luke.

Luke heard his father's thoughts, as clearly as if they had been spoken words.

"I ..I don't understand," Luke said. "How? And what makes you think I would help you anyway?"

Because you know I am telling the truth. You know that I am your father.

Leia watched the strange exchange with growing alarm.

"Luke, what is he doing?" she said, stepping closer to the bed.

"He's communicating, Leia," Luke replied, his eyes not leaving Vader's. "He is speaking to me."

Leia felt a shiver go down her spine. "Don't let him into your mind, Luke," she said, grabbing her brother's arm. "Don't let him poison your mind! He will destroy you if you let him!"

Vader turned his eyes to Leia, feeling a rush of terror emanating from her as she momentarily allowed her emotional barrier down.

If I wanted to destroy you, my daughter, I would have done so when I had the chance.

Leia started as though burned, and looked with wide eyes at her father.

"Stop it," she warned him. "Don't try your sorcery on me, Vader! I won't stand for it!"

We are connected, Leia, whether you like it or not, whether you admit it or not... I can see your thoughts, you can see mine. It is only your hatred and anger that blind you to the truth.

"Get out of my mind!" she screamed at him. "I hate you! I will *always* hate you! Nothing will ever change that, even if by some horrible twist of fate you are my biological father! You stole my *real* father from me, as well as my mother, when you stood by and watched Alderaan get blown to bits! *They* were my parents, the only parents I ever had, the only parents I ever needed!"

"Leia, calm down," Luke said, taking her by the shoulders. "He's in no condition for this."

She glared at her brother. "Why should I care? Did he care about the millions of people on Alderaan when he let them die?"

Vader closed his eyes, feeling utterly exhausted and defeated by the waves of utter hatred he felt directed at him from his daughter. The fact that she was the very image of her mother made her loathing all the more painful.

"Perhaps you two ought to leave," the medical droid suggested. "Lord Vader is very agitated, and your presence here seems to have only exacerbated his condition."

"Gladly," Leia snapped, and turned to leave. She had almost reached the door when a crystal clear thought entered her mind, and she stopped in her tracks.

I am so very sorry.

She straightened her back and left the room without looking back.

"I'm sorry about that," Luke said awkwardly. "Leia is... well, she kind of speaks her mind. She is very angry right now, very confused. I am too, to be honest. I don't know why I'm telling you this; I think you can see for yourself how she's feeling."

Vader fought to open his eyes once more to look at his son. He could feel the boy's goodness, his pureness of heart and spirit. *So much like his mother*, Vader thought as his eyes

closed once again and he drifted off.

Leia and Luke were met in the corridor by Admiral Piett.

“Ah, there you are,” he said as he looked from one to the other. “I’ve come to let you know that we have just made the reversion to sublight. We’ve arrived at Kamino.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another, wondering what this new twist in this unexpected chapter of their lives would mean.

“Will you take him to the surface right away?” Luke asked.

Piett nodded. “Yes, right away. We’ve alerted the surgical team that we will be arriving within the hour. They are getting everything ready.”

“Surgical team?” Luke asked. “What sort of surgery are you talking about?”

Piett sighed, realizing that he had revealed more than he had intended. Still, there was no doubt in his mind or his heart that these were Vader’s children; they had a right to know.

“Your father is about to undergo extensive reconstructive surgery,” Piett told them both. “The cloners have regenerated his damaged organs and limbs, and will be performing a massive transplant procedure on him. If all goes well, he will be completely remade.”

“If all goes well?” Leia asked. “What does that mean?”

“Well, the surgery is very risky, from what I understand,” Piett replied. “There is a chance he won’t survive it.”

“Then why is he doing it?” Luke asked.

“He hasn’t shared his reasoning with me,” Piett replied. “But my suspicion is that he feels you will accept him more readily if he is fully human again.”

Luke frowned. “You mean he is risking his life just to get us to accept him?” Piett shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. “That is my suspicion, yes.”

Luke looked at Leia, and saw that she was as stunned by this revelation as he was. *Perhaps the transformation had already begun*, Luke thought to himself, taking his sister’s hand. She looked at him, hearing his thought, which still unnerved her. She frowned, not wanting to admit to him or even herself that he may be right. She didn’t want to think about the implications of a remade Anakin Skywalker in her life.

Chapter 19

CHAPTER 19

Luke and Leia returned to the quarters where they had remained for the past two days, an awkward silence between them. What had transpired in the medical bay had affected them both deeply, but in different ways.

Luke felt certain that he had found his father; the connection he felt to Vader was too strong to deny. Yet, he was very confused. Why had Obi-Wan lied to him? Why hadn't he tell him the truth about what had happened to his father? And more importantly, what *had* happened to his father? From what Luke knew about him, Anakin Skywalker was a hero, an honorable and brave man who had served the Republic in the Clone Wars and was renowned throughout the galaxy for his heroics. How could a man like that become Darth Vader? Luke thought back to that day on Tatooine 2 years ago when he had encountered Ben Kenobi, when he had asked the old Jedi about his father. Kenobi had seemed reluctant to speak of him, just as Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru had been; but when he finally did speak, his enigmatic words only made Luke's heart ache more with the loss of the father he'd wanted all his life.

How did my father die?

A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine until he turned to evil, helped hunt down and destroy the Jedi Knights. He betrayed and murdered your father.

Betrayed and murdered... how is that even remotely close to the truth? Luke thought angrily. Obviously his father turned to the Dark Side. But why? How did it happen? Luke's mind burned with these questions, and there was only one person who could answer them; but his life was hanging in the balance. *He has to survive this surgery... I have to hear the truth from him, I have to give him a chance to explain what happened to turn the good man known as Anakin Skywalker into the monster Darth Vader.*

As for Leia, her thoughts were far darker than those of her twin. Ironically, she'd had no trouble at all accepting the fact that she and Luke were twins separated at birth. It was almost as if she had always known it on some level. *But accepting Vader was another matter...*

It disturbed Leia greatly that she had heard Vader's thoughts so clearly, almost as if he were speaking the words aloud. And the fact that he could hear hers was even more alarming. Until recently, she had known Darth Vader to be nothing but a ruthless, inhuman monster. His evil deeds were legendary and far reaching, for it was reputed that he was instrumental in the annihilation of the Jedi. Leia herself had known him for years, and had never felt anything but utter loathing for him and all he represented. Yet in the past 5 days he had spared the lives of both her and Luke, had arranged for Han's bounty to be paid, and had even brought her lunch. Not only that, he had demonstrated concern for her safety when he and Luke were dueling with their lightsabers. Why did he have to confuse her that way? She had always known what to expect of him; until now. Leia thought back to the conversation she'd had with him when they were in Cloud City, when he was busily reassembling C3P0.

I know what the Hutts are like. They are not to be trifled with.

No, I don't imagine so... but that had nothing to do with you. Why do you care what happens to him?

Because you care.

Because you care... What does that mean? Why does he care how I feel all of a sudden? *Because he's your father...* Leia closed her eyes, trying to block out the feelings deep inside that would not be silenced. Deep down, she *knew* he was her father; the strength of the connection was just too strong to ignore. *But that doesn't mean I have to accept him... no matter what, he is still the same monster who destroyed my home and killed my parents... that will never change, no matter what.*

"Are you okay?"

Leia's thoughts were interrupted by her brother's hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him.

"Are you okay?" He repeated.

"I don't know," she replied. "I'm not sure how I feel, Luke. I'm worried about Han, I'm concerned about our lengthy absence from the Alliance— they must be wondering what became of us. The droids... they were left behind on Cloud City, but I suppose Lando can see to it that they get back to the Alliance, as well as Han, assuming of course that Vader keeps his word, which is highly unlikely.." she rattled on and on in the way that Luke had come to recognize as her way of hiding what was truly on her mind.

"I'm sure Han can look after himself," Luke reassured her. "This Lando character will feel indebted to him I'm sure after the way he betrayed Han and you to Vader. As for the droids, 3PO will make sure Han doesn't leave them behind," he added, a smile on his face as he thought of Han having to put up with Threepio's incessant chatter without he or Leia there to act as a buffer. "Is that it? Nothing else on your mind?"

Leia looked up at her brother warily. "I know what you're referring to, Luke," she said, standing up. "And I don't want to discuss it."

Luke watched her, feeling the conflict within her. *Much like the conflict he had sensed within their father...*

"Leia, we can't just ignore this situation," Luke said at last, turning to her. "I know you don't want to face it, but it's not something we can pretend isn't happening. It *is* happening, Vader is our father, he is fighting for his life, and we have to come to terms with this whole situation somehow."

Leia did not turn to him. She felt oddly betrayed by him; when he had arrived at Cloud City she felt certain that his hatred for Vader matched her own. All that had changed when Vader had uttered those dreadful words... *I am your father*. Now it seemed as though Luke's loyalties were divided and confused, and that worried Leia.

"You seem to have already come to terms with it, Luke," she commented without turning to him. "I don't know how you can, but you have already accepted this remarkably well, far better than I ever will."

Luke walked around her so that he was face to face with her. "I'm struggling with it, just as you are Leia," he told her. "But for different reasons. I am feeling confused, and betrayed; I want to know why we were lied to, why were separated, and what happened to cause our father to turn into the evil man we have always known him to be. I want answers, Leia. I *need* answers. And I think you do too. You're just so angry right now you can't see that."

Leia lifted her eyes to his. "Yes, I'm angry," she retorted hotly. "I'm damn angry, Luke. How else do you expect me to feel?"

"It's natural for you to feel that way," he replied calmly, putting his hands on her shoulders. "But remember this; anger leads to the Dark Side, and the Dark Side is what destroyed our father."

Luke's words startled her, and she backed away from him. "I don't think I like what you're implying, Luke," she said, her dark eyes full of anger.

"I'm not implying anything," Luke replied. "I'm just warning you, Leia. Be careful. Don't let your hatred and anger destroy you."

Leia was about to reply when the door opened. They both turned to see Admiral Piett entering the room. He could see that he was interrupting a heated discussion between the twins.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I seem to be interrupting something."

"No, not at all," Leia said, resuming her calm, senatorial demeanor.

"We are taking your father to the surface now," he continued, not convinced that Leia was being truthful. "I wanted to invite you to come along. That is, if you are interested in coming."

Luke looked at his sister, knowing that she was as desperate to see the transformation of Darth Vader as he was, yet unwilling to admit it.

"We are very interested," he told Piett. "We'll come right now."

Chapter 20

CHAPTER 20

Lord Vader was brought to the surface of Kamino, accompanied by a medical droid who was needed to monitor the Dark Lord's vital signs during transport, by Admiral Piett, two clone troopers and his two children.

Luke sat close to his father's unconscious form during the short shuttle trip, watching him closely. He had not sensed anything from him for well over an hour, and despite everything, this worried him. So long as his mind was still active, Vader still seemed strong enough to overcome this crisis. But now that his mind seemed to be shutting down as well, things were not looking good.

Luke was unsure why this bothered him, but it did. Perhaps it was simply the fact that were Vader to die, Luke would never have the answers he needed. Obi-Wan was gone now, and he had never been forthright anyway, telling him half truths and putting his own spin on what had happened.

But there was more to it than merely getting the answers that he needed, and this is what confused Luke. Why should he care if Vader lived or died, even if he were his father? He was a monstrous villain, a heartless cyborg; surely the galaxy would be a better and certainly a safer place without him. *So why did the thought of him dying bother Luke so much?*

Kamino's surface was wet and stormy as the small group made their way from the landing platform. A protective shield had been generated around the stretcher holding Vader to protect him from the elements. They were met in the entrance way by a pair from the medical team.

"What is his condition?" they asked the medical droid as they proceeded without preamble down the corridor.

"Unstable for the past several hours," the droid replied, "and declining. He was conscious briefly earlier this afternoon, but hasn't shown any signs of consciousness since. He's slipping away."

"Then we will have to proceed with the surgery immediately," one of the physicians commented.

"Even in his present condition?" Piett questioned. "Isn't that rather dangerous?"

"We have no choice," the second physician replied. "If we don't do anything he will most certainly die. It's risky, but if he is to stand a chance of survival, we must take that chance."

"I understand," Piett replied, casting a glance at Luke and Leia. "I know you'll do everything you can to save him."

The physicians joined the entourage as they proceeded through the corridor en route to the medical facility.

Luke looked over at his sister, and he could tell by the expression on her face that she was deep in thought. They had spoken very during the trip over to Kamino, and Luke was worried about her. Her anger was unrelenting, as was her hatred of Vader. Hatred was an emotion of darkness; even in his brief tutelage as a Jedi Luke understood just how dangerous an emotion it was. When left unchecked, it could destroy a person. *Just as it destroyed my father...*

Luke looked ahead at Vader, wondering what it could have been that had caused him to turn. How could a man like Anakin Skywalker have embraced the Dark Side? Who did he hate so much that it caused such a transformation? What was the source of his tremendous anger? There was only one person who could answer those questions, and he was clinging to life at that very moment.

"I'm afraid you will have to wait here," the physicians announced as the group reached the medical facility. "I will see to it that you are given anything you require during your wait, as I'm afraid it will be quite a lengthy one."

"I need to send a message to the Alliance," Leia said. "Can you make arrangements for that?"

"I will see that someone assists you, Princess," the physician replied. "Now if you will excuse us, we shall tend to our patient."

"You really think that is a good idea?" Luke asked Leia.

"What do you mean?" Leia asked. "Surely they are worried about us. I don't want them wasting valuable man power searching for us unnecessarily. After all, it wasn't exactly our choice to be here, was it?" she added, looking at Piett.

"That's not the point," Luke replied. "If the Alliance knows we're here, they will come to get us, and once they find out that Vader is in a vulnerable state, they will do everything they can to kill him!"

Leia frowned. "All I want to do is let them know we are alive, Luke."

Piett had overheard the conversation and stepped over to the twins. "Princess, I have already contacted your leaders," he said. "They know you and your brother are guests on board the *Executor*. I did not give them the particulars, but assured them that you were both safe and well."

"Guests?" Leia repeated. "Guests invited by a tractor beam?"

Piett met the princess' icy glare. "Another star destroyer would have blown the Falcon out of the sky, Princess," he replied. "Perhaps you should consider that when before you are so quick to judge my actions." Piett walked away from them and left the room.

"Leia, please," Luke pleaded. "Admiral Piett has not treated us like prisoners, and you know it."

Leia looked at her brother, starting to worry about his allegiances. "You know Luke, you are starting to sound like an Imperial sympathizer," she commented. "You may be happy to be a guest on board an enemy vessel, but I am not. I know the way the Empire operates better than you do, and I am not fooled by this phony show of good will."

Luke was beginning to grow annoyed with Leia's negative attitude.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Leia," he replied, not allowing himself to be dragged into yet another argument with his twin. He walked away from her and went into the corridor where he found Piett.

"Your sister is very bitter," Piett commented.

"Yes," Luke replied. "She is having a lot of trouble accepting this. She has hated Vader for a very long time."

Piett nods. "Understandably so," he commented. "Why is it you are not struggling with this the way she is?"

"Who say's I'm not?" Luke responded. "I grew up thinking my father was a navigator on a spice freighter. And then I was told he was Jedi who had been murdered by Darth Vader. Needless to say, this has been very confusing, not to mention upsetting."

"You believe him though, don't you?" Piett asked. "You believe that Vader is your father."

Luke looked at the admiral, who seemed unlike any of the Imperial officers he'd encountered in his short time with the Alliance. Piett was intelligent, dignified, and intuitive. He seemed to have a great deal of compassion for both Vader and he and Leia, which surprised him. All of these qualities made him rather unique among the Imperial admiralty, of that Luke was certain. *Not surprising Vader chose him to be his confidante.*

"Yes, I do believe it," Luke replied. "I can't say why or how I know, but I just feel it within me that he is my father. But I also know that he was not always the man he is now, the man who has terrorized the galaxy for years. That is the man I want to know, Admiral. I want to find that man, for I know that he must still exist within Darth Vader. I am convinced that he is."

Piett smiled. "You honor your father, Luke," he said. "If anyone can bring Anakin Skywalker out of the darkness, you can do it."

Luke shrugged. "I don't know about that," he replied. "But I hope I have the chance to try. You surprise me, Admiral. I would never have expected an Imperial officer to speak that way."

Piett frowned. "In what way?"

"Like you'd like to see Anakin Skywalker return," Luke replied. "You realize that if my father abandons the Dark Side, he would not have any sympathy for the Empire."

"I realize that, Luke," Piett responded. 'Perhaps deep down inside I don't either,' he added enigmatically. "I've seen a lot in my years of service to the Empire. So much injustice, so many atrocities; when I enlisted, I was so naïve I didn't realize what the true nature of the Empire was. Now I do, and I have to say that it has disillusioned me."

Luke was surprised by Piett's confession. "I'm surprised you haven't switched sides if you feel that way," he commented.

Piett smiled. "I'm not happy, Luke, but I'm not a traitor. I have been loyal to your father for over 2 years now. I suppose I have always seen something in him that others cannot; it's gratifying to know that my loyalty has not been misplaced. If he is indeed on his way back to

becoming Anakin Skywalker once again, then I for one will gladly remain by his side no matter what.”

Luke smiles. “I can see now why my father trusts you the way he does,” he replied. “His trust is well placed. I don’t imagine getting him to abandon the Dark Side will be easy, not without knowing the reason he turned in the first place.”

“True,” Piett commented thoughtfully. “I suppose the only one who could tell us that is Vader himself.”

“Or my mother...” Luke said.

“Your mother? She’s alive?” Piett replied in surprise.

“I don’t know,” Luke answered. ‘Leia said that Vader had mentioned that he thought she might be, but that he didn’t have a chance to elaborate for that was when I arrived on the scene.’

“If she were, then I would imagine her influence would go a long way towards bringing him back,” Piett commented.

“Perhaps it would,” Luke replied. “But I would have no idea how to find her even if she were alive.”

Piett nodded. “Perhaps that’s where I can help,” he replied. “I certainly have more resources at my disposal than you do, Luke. Would you entrust me with the task of finding her?”

Luke looked at the admiral, trying to read the man’s thoughts. Was he being sincere? Or was Leia right, that this goodwill was all an act designed to gain their trust and lower their guard? He sensed no duplicity in Piett, however; he appeared to be telling the truth.

“You think you could find her?” Luke asked. “If she wants to be hidden?”

Piett shrugged. “Perhaps. I found you, Luke,” he replied with a smile.

“That was you who located Echo Base?” Luke asked.

“Well, I was part of a team who was analyzing the data coming in from the probe droids,” Piett replied. “I cannot take all the credit.”

Luke decided that he liked Piett, despite the fact that technically he ought to consider him his enemy. “Are you also the one who gave us a head start?” Luke countered.

“Oh, now that was the late Admiral Ozzel,” Piett replied.

“The *late* Admiral Ozzel?” Luke asked.

Piett nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid your father doesn’t have much tolerance for stupidity.”

Luke was a little upset to hear this, for it was an unwelcome reminder of just what sort of a man Darth Vader was. *Is it possible to draw him out of the Darkness? Or am I just kidding myself?* Luke wondered. *Time will tell I suppose.*

Time was something that seemed to be passing exceptionally slowly as they awaited word on the progress of the surgery. Twelve hours had passed, during which time Luke and Leia ate

some rather unique Kamino cuisine, tried to sleep, and kept their distance from one another. It bothered them that their friendship was being put to the test by this crisis, just when they needed one another more than ever. Luke had decided to give Leia time to sort through this on her own, rather than pressure her to come to his way of thinking.

As for Piett, he divided his time between the surface and the *Executor* where he was kept busy finding things to keep his officers busy and reporting to the emperor. Naturally the emperor was concerned about the health of his loyal apprentice and demanded regular updates on his condition. Piett had not informed the emperor of the extent of the surgery Vader was undergoing; only that he had been injured on Cloud City and was that is life was in danger. Somehow Piett had the impression that the emperor would not be happy to learn of Vader's plans, and after all, he had sworn to Vader not to tell anyone. That included the emperor as far as Piett was concerned.

"No word yet?" Piett asked as he entered the waiting area where Luke and Leia were.

"No," Luke replied. "It's been close to 14 hours. Shouldn't they be finished by now?"

"Perhaps there were complications," Piett suggested.

"I don't think so," Luke replied. He looked at his sister. "We would have felt it if there was." Leia did not reply, but did not deny what her brother had said either. She had decided that denying her feelings to Luke was a waste of time.

"Perhaps we should make some inquiries," Piett suggested.

"We've tried," Leia said. "They just keep putting us off."

"Well I suppose then we will just have to be..." Piett started to say but stopped as he saw an orderly enter the room.

"You have news about Lord Vader?" Piett asked the woman.

"The surgery is complete," she told them.

"And?" Luke asked. "Is he alive? Did he make it?"

"Lord Vader is alive," she replied. "In fairly stable condition."

"Why did it take so long?" Leia asked.

"The surgery itself took 10 hours," the alien replied. "Lord Vader has spent the past 4 hours immersed in a bacta tank to help with the healing process. We are quite pleased with the results."

"May we see him?" Luke asked.

"Yes you may," she replied. "Briefly of course, he is still unconscious. Follow me please."

Luke and Leia along with Piett followed the alien down the corridor. Luke reached over and took his sister's hand. She did not refuse it, and looked up at him. He smiled at her, and gave her hand a squeeze, communicating to her silently his love. She smiled back, trying to be supportive of him.

The alien slid her card through the reader and the doors glided open. Luke and Leia entered the room tentatively. Piett stood back, allowing the twins to approach the bed alone. Luke and Leia were stunned when their eyes beheld their father.

The surgeons had done an exceptional job. He was lying on his back, the upper part of his body uncovered to reveal a smooth heavily muscled torso. His long arms, now fully human, were equally impressive. But it was his face that Luke and Leia could not take their eyes away from. Although he still had no hair, his face was no longer the mass of scars it had been mere days ago. *This is the face of Anakin Skywalker* both Luke and Leia realized in astonishment. He was ruggedly handsome, with strong features and a deep cleft in his chin. The resemblance he bore Luke was unmistakable; he *was* Anakin Skywalker.

"He's so... so young," Luke said quietly, not taking his eyes from his father's face. "He must have been so young when all this happened to him."

Leia could only nod. The sight of her father's face affected her far more than she would have imagined. It hardly seemed possible that the noble, beautiful man before them could be the same person who had been responsible for such destruction and terror throughout the galaxy for so long. But there was no denying it now, and Leia knew it.

"So now what?" Leia asked. "What comes now?"

Luke shook his head. "I don't know, Leia. I suppose we just have to wait until he wakes up to see who he is."

Leia looked at him. "Who he is? We know who he is, Luke."

"Do we Leia?" he asked. "I don't think we do. And only he knows for sure."

Piett stepped up to the bed, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Incredible," Piett said softly as he beheld the remade Vader. *Or was it Skywalker? He looks younger than me...* Piett thought in amazement.

"His body is not rejecting the new organs?" Luke asked looking up at one of the physicians.

"No, the integration went very well," he replied. "Of course, they were regenerated from his own cells; it's not likely that his body would reject them."

"Of course," Luke replied. "How long before he regains consciousness?"

"Not too long," the physician replied. "I can revive him now if you wish."

As much as Luke wanted to speak to his father, he didn't want to deprive him of the rest his body needed.

"No, I can wait," Luke replied. "It won't be easy, but I've waited this long. Another hour won't kill me."

The physician smiled, or at least it looked like a smile to Luke. "Very wise of you," he replied. "Just be patient, Luke. It won't be long now."

Luke nodded. He looked at his sister, who had said very little since seeing their father's newly repaired state.

“Well Leia?” he asked her. “Do you believe now?”

She looked up at him briefly before returning her eyes to the sleeping face of their father. “I suppose I have no choice now, do I?” she replied quietly.

Luke smiled, realizing this was as close to acceptance as she was willing to go right now; but at least it was a step in the right direction.

“Admiral Piett, there is a priority message for you from the *Executor*,” one of the clones told him, stepping into the room.

Piett looked back and acknowledged the trooper.

“I’ll be right back,” he told Leia and Luke, and then left the room.

Once in the corridor, Piett activated his comm. link. “Piett here, what is it captain?”

“Admiral Piett, the emperor just signaled us,” a voice on the other end replied. “He is on his way to Kamino.”

“What?” Piett replied. “He’s coming here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Understood,” he responded. “Piett out.”

Piett stood in the corridor for a moment, his mind working feverishly to decide what the best course of action would be. If Palpatine came here now and found Anakin Skywalker and his children, what would his reaction be? Piett felt certain that he knew, and it made his blood run cold.

“Luke, Leia,” he called over to them as he entered the recovery room once more, “we have a problem.”

Chapter 21

CHAPTER 21

“Problem?” Luke replied, a feeling of alarm growing within him. “What do you mean, problem?” he asked.

“I mean the emperor is on his way here, right now,” Piett replied.

“What?” exclaimed Leia. “You set us up! I was right all along; this has been a plot from the beginning!”

“No, princess, I swear to you,” Piett replied. “I had no idea that he would come here! He knows nothing about what has transpired here, the only knowledge he has is that Vader was injured and required medical treatment. I am as shocked as you are to learn that he is coming here.”

“Why should we believe you?” Luke asked suspiciously, beginning to think that Leia had been right all along.

“You are not thinking logically, either of you!” Piett retorts. “Why would I alert Palpatine of what your father is doing here? Do you realize what the emperor will do when he learns of this? Your father did not consult the emperor about any of this! Why would I put your father in this position?”

Luke relented, realizing that Piett was right; he would never knowingly put Vader in a position of danger. His loyalty was above question.

“Then how did the emperor know?” Leia asked.

“I think I know,” Luke said as an idea dawned on him. He looked back at his father’s sleeping form. ‘He sensed it,’ Luke continued. “He sensed that Vader’s hold on the Dark Side was weakening.” He looked over at Leia and Piett. “He knows that Anakin Skywalker is returning.”

Leia felt a shiver go down her spine at Luke’s words. “What will he do to him?” she asked quietly.

“Kill him,” Piett replied without hesitation. “Anakin Skywalker was the greatest Jedi knight in the galaxy; if he returns, if he abandons the Dark Side, he will pose a tremendous threat to Palpatine. He will kill him, Princess Leia, as well as the two of you.”

“Or try to turn us into Siths,” Luke added solemnly.

Leia looked up at her brother, her dark eyes wide with terror. “What did you say?”

“You heard me, Leia,” Luke replied. “We are the children of Anakin Skywalker, the emperor must know this. And if he does, he must also know that we are strong with the Force, like our father is. We would be powerful allies to him.”

“Or deadly enemies,” Piett put in. “We have to get you off of Kamino as soon as possible.”

“What about our father?” Luke asked. “We can’t just leave him here to be killed by Palpatine! He is in no condition now to fight him!”

Piett frowned, anxiety filling him over this dire set of circumstances he found them in all of a sudden. He looked over at the physicians, who were trying not to listen to the conversation.

“Is he strong enough to be moved?” he asked.

“No, not even close to it!” one of them replied. “Do you realize the severity of this surgery he has just undergone?”

“Yes, we do,” Luke replied. “But the situation doesn’t leave us any choice. If the emperor finds him here, he will kill him.”

The physicians looked at one another in alarm.

“The only way you could safely move him would be in a medical capsule, but I’m afraid we don’t have such a device in this facility,” another of the physicians suggested.

“We have one on board the ship,” Piett said.

“Then let’s get it,” Luke said.

The three of them rushed into the corridor. “Go back to the ship at once,” Piett ordered the clones. “We need a medical capsule here. Move!”

“Right away sir!”

The clones ran down the corridor and disappeared around the corner.

The waiting was unbearable, for it seemed as though the clones were taking far too long to return to the surface. Luke did not say anything, but secretly he felt that something was wrong. Very wrong.

“How far away was the emperor when your captain notified you?” Leia asked Piett.

“He didn’t say,” Piett replied. ‘But I anticipate he won’t be long. I’m going to make contact with the ship and see what’s taking so long,’ he added. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m surprised that Vader would do something without the emperor’s permission,” Luke commented as he and Leia walked through the corridor together. “Makes me think that he had already begun his transformation.”

“Don’t be so sure, Luke,” Leia commented “I’m sure Vader had his own selfish reasons for doing this.”

“You’re still convinced he is incapable of redemption, aren’t you?” Luke asked her as they rounded a corner. “That he can never be anything but a monster?”

Leia stopped and folded her arms over her chest. “And you’re convinced he is a wonderful, kind hearted person simply because he demonstrated one act of humanity. Paying for Han’s bounty hardly makes up for a lifetime of monstrosities.”

Luke faced his twin, exasperated by her stubbornness. “What does he need to do to make you...” Luke stopped, as a strange feeling came over him. He looked down the corridor. *Someone was coming.*

“Luke, what is it?” Leia asked, growing alarmed by the look on her brother’s face.

“Run, Leia,” Luke said urgently. “Run!”

The twins ran down the corridor and around the corner, straight into Piett.

“What is going on?” he cried. Then he looked up and saw the two red robed guards approaching. *Oh no...*

“In the name of the galactic Emperor Palpatine, you are ordered to surrender these prisoners,” one of the masked guards intoned.

“We are *not* prisoners!” Leia protested, her heart pounding in her chest.

“They are guests upon the *Executor*,” Piett explained, fearing that his authority would be overridden. “They are not prisoners to be handed back and forth.”

One of the guards pointed his Force pike at Piett. “Are you questioning the Emperor’s orders?” he asked ominously.

Piett looked from Luke and Leia back to the guard. “And if I am?”

The guard didn’t hesitate for a moment and sent a bolt of energy at Piett, sending the admiral against the wall in a blur of electricity.

“No!” Leia cried as Piett slumped to the floor.

“Where is Darth Vader?” the guard asked, turning to Luke and Leia.

“He’s dead,” Luke replied, thinking fast. “He died several hours ago.”

The guards looked at one another as though in silent communication.

“Your master knew he was injured,” Luke went on. “He died of those injuries. We were too late to get him here.”

“What is behind that door?” one of the scarlet guards asked, indicating the blast doors that lead to the medical facility.

“This is a cloning facility,” Luke told them. “That is where they keep the embryos,” he added.

“Prove it,” the guard challenged him. “Open that door.”

“We don’t have the code to open it,” protested Leia.

The guard aimed his Force pike at her, as she looked at Luke for help. Luke thought frantically, and then a memory came to him.

“You don’t need to see what is behind that door,” Luke told them, putting the Force behind his suggestion.

The guards looked at one another, and then back at Luke.

“Darth Vader is dead, you will not find him here,” Luke added, continuing to manipulate the guards’ minds with the Force.

“Come with us,” said the guard who had assaulted Piett while the other one confiscated Luke’s lightsaber from his belt. They were shoved along with the end of the guards’ pikes, both of them realizing that any resistance would result in them suffering the same fate as Piett. Leia looked over at her brother, trying to master her terror.

It’s okay, Leia... Luke told her silently. *Father will help us.*

Leia looked at him in disbelief, but in her heart hoped that he was right. He was their only hope now.

Help us Father! Please, help us!

Inside the medical facility, the patient suddenly became very agitated. None of the doctors could figure out why.

Chapter 22

CHAPTER 22

Firmus Piett regained consciousness with a splitting headache. He stood up shakily, leaning against the wall for support. He rubbed the back of his head where it had collided with the bulkhead and was dismayed to find a nasty bump there. He was discombobulated for a moment, trying to recall what had happened. And then it hit him. He looked around frantically.

“Luke! Leia!” He called, running through the corridor. But the twins were no where to be found. Piett began to grow frantic as he ran back to the medical facility. He activated the door chime, and waited anxiously for the doors to open.

“Admiral Piett, I’m glad to see you,” the physician said as the doors opened upon him. “Lord Vader seems to be in distress.”

“Are Luke and Leia in here?” Piett asked, looking around for the twins.

“No, they are not,” one of the nurses replied. “Why? What has happened?”

Piett stopped and looked at Vader. “The emperor has abducted them,” he said simply. “I tried to stop them... but I was no match for them.” He looked up at the doctors and explained what had happened. They stood around listening in shocked horror to Piett’s account.

“Lord Vader has to be told,” Piett said, looking down at the sleeping Dark Lord. “Is there any way you can revive him?”

“Normally I would advise against it,” the head physician replied. “But given the circumstances you have just described, it seems like we have little choice.”

“I trust that you will respect Lord Vader’s privacy in this matter,” Piett commented. “And tell no one, particularly the emperor, of what has transpired here.”

The physician exchanged a look with his colleagues before looking back at Piett. “The emperor has made many enemies here, Admiral. I can assure you that we will tell him nothing.”

Piett smiled in relief. “Thank you,” he replied. “And for everything you have done. I know that I speak for Lord Vader when I say that your loyalty to him will not be forgotten.”

“No need to speak for him, Piett.”

Everyone turned around to see that Vader was awake, and judging by the serious expression on his face, was aware of what was going on.

“Lord Vader!” Piett exclaimed, approaching his bedside at once. ‘Lord Vader, the emperor has abducted Luke and Leia,’ he said. “I tried to stop them, but they struck me with their force pike. I am so sorry my lord.”

Vader frowned feeling the hatred for his master filling him with indescribably rage. *No, he is not my master... not any more...*

"Help me," he said simply, the sound of his natural voice astounding him after so long.

Piett immediately assisted the Dark Lord to a sitting position.

"Lord Vader, you are recovering from a traumatic surgical procedure," cautioned one of the physicians. "You are in no condition to get out of that bed, let alone leave this facility."

Blue eyes stared at the physician, startling in their intensity. "I have no choice," he said, standing up with Piett's assistance. "The emperor has become my enemy, and I will stop at nothing to save my children from his grasp."

"What do you think you can do in your present condition?" The physician countered. "You need time to acclimate to your new body. You need rest, Lord Vader, and lots of it."

"I don't have time to rest, don't you understand?" Vader retorted. "Every minute my children are in the hands of that madman they are in danger. I will not allow him to destroy them as he destroyed me."

Vader turned to Piett. "Help me get to the ship, Piett."

Piett looked over at the physicians, torn between doing what he knew was best for Lord Vader's well being, and helping him in his quest to save his children.

"You will need some clothes," Piett pointed out. "Sleep pants won't do if we are going after the emperor, my lord."

Vader smiled at Piett, grateful for his unflagging loyalty.

"Can you help me?" Vader asked the alien physicians.

They looked at one another, knowing that they were not about to change his mind. It was obvious that his children meant more to him than anything.

"I'm sure we can find something," one of the nurses replied.

A short time later, Vader and Piett were on their way to the shuttle. Vader loved the sensation of the rain on his face, and wished he had the time to stop and enjoy it fully. But he did not, and so they proceeded into the shuttle. The clones had only just returned, and were both shocked to see the man with Admiral Piett, neither of them imagining for a moment that this handsome strapping man was in fact Darth Vader.

"What of Lord Vader?" asked one of the clones as they strapped themselves in.

"Lord Vader is dead," Piett replied simply. "Head for the ship, immediately."

Luke and Leia sat in the detention cell on board the emperor's flag ship. No one had told them what their fate was, nor had they seen the emperor yet. Both were afraid, yet both felt compelled to be strong for the other.

"I wonder if he's awake yet," Luke asked.

Leia shrugged. "I doubt it, Luke. That was a pretty serious operation he had. I have serious doubts that he would be able to help us even if he .." she stopped, knowing that her next

words would upset her brother.

“Even if he wanted to? Was that what you were going to say?” Luke asked her.

“I’m sorry, Luke,” Leia said. “I know you feel that he has changed; I’m just not convinced.”

“Yes, I know,” he replied. “But you heard what Piett said; he went through that dangerous operation so that we would accept him. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Leia stood up. “I don’t know, Luke,” she sighed. “It might just be his way of gaining our trust.”

“Is there something wrong with that?” Luke countered. “He’s our father; of course he wants us to trust him.”

Leia shook her head. “Luke, you’re too unquestioning, too naïve. If Darth Vader is interested in us, I can guarantee you it isn’t because he wants to form a fatherly bond with us. He wants us for something else, something that will serve his purposes. Don’t think for a moment that he wouldn’t be above using his own children, Luke.”

Luke looked at her. “Well, at least you’ve finally accepted that he *is* our father.”

“Well it’s hard to deny, Luke,” she replied. “Impossible in fact. The resemblance to you is unquestionable.”

Luke smiled. “Yes, I noticed that too,” he remarked. “I never would have dreamed that he was so young.”

“No, me neither,” Leia replied. “Luke, what is going to happen to us?” she asked, her fears surfacing despite her best efforts to keep them at bay.

Luke looked up at his sister, seeing her fears clearly in her dark eyes.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But if they were going to kill us, I think they would have done so by now. I think the emperor has other plans for us, Leia. Master Yoda told me that the emperor wanted me because of my abilities; you have those abilities too, Leia, even if you don’t know how to use them yet. The emperor knows that.”

Leia frowned. “What are you saying, Luke? That the emperor wants us to become his allies?”

“Not his allies, Leia; his servants. According to Obi-Wan lost Vader to the emperor, *lost* him. That tells me that the emperor made a concerted effort to bring him to the Dark Side. He will try to do the same to us.”

Leia did not reply, her brother’s words chilling her. “He may try, but he won’t succeed.”

Luke reflected just how dangerously close to the Dark Side Leia was in the depth of her anger; if the emperor sensed her tremendous hatred for their father, he would undoubtedly use it to his advantage.

“We have to be strong, Leia,” Luke told her. “The emperor is very powerful, very manipulative. If he senses the smallest amount of weakness in us, he will jump on it.”

“Don’t worry about me, Luke,” replied Leia. “I’m not going to let him intimidate me.”

“I don’t think you understand, Leia,” Luke explained gently. “The Dark Side thrives on anger, on hatred and fear; if the emperor sees how you hate our father, he will take advantage of it, he will try to use it against you.”

Leia felt a chill go down her spine when she realized what Luke was trying to tell her. *Am I in danger of the Dark Side? Is my hatred for Vader really enough to destroy me?*

“I’m scared, Luke,” Leia said quietly.

Luke stood up and walked over to his sister. He put his arms around her and held her close. “So am I,” he confided in her. “But we have each other Leia; you’re not alone in this.”

The door opened and two red robed guards entered the small cell.

“Come with us,” they said, pointing their pikes at Luke.

“Not without my sister,” Luke said.

One of them pointed their pike at Leia. “Come with us or she will die.”

Luke looked at his sister in alarm. “Don’t hurt her!” he shouted. Leia looked at him with terror in her dark eyes.

“Then come with us,” the guard repeated. “NOW.”

Luke knew that he had no choice but to comply. “It’ll be alright, Leia,” he told his sister. She could only nod, the constriction in her throat preventing her from speaking.

Leia stood rooted to the floor as the guards led her brother away and then closed the doors behind them. She sat down on the hard bench and put her hands in her face, feeling utterly alone. She closed her eyes and tried to use the Force to reach out to her brother. A strong force presence struck her as she concentrated, but it was not Luke. It was her father.

I am coming, Leia, I will not let any harm come to you or your brother. You have my promise.

Leia could feel the depth of the emotions her father’s force signature carried; not the dark emotions she’d come to expect from Darth Vader, but the emotions of compassion, of protectiveness, of love. *This can’t be right... this must be Luke I’m sensing... Vader is not capable of those emotions.*

I am not Vader, Leia... you know who I am.

No I don’t... I don’t know what to think or what to believe any more.

I’m your father, Leia. I’m Anakin Skywalker.

Chapter 23

CHAPTER 23

On board the *Executor*, the official word was that Darth Vader was dead. Admiral Piett was now in command, and life seemed to go on as always. No one had put money on the Dark Lord dying, so there was some grumbling among the participants of the death pool. Piett was disgusted by the callousness of the men, and reprimanded them soundly when he overheard them talking about the odds of Lord Vader dying before some of the more likely candidates on the list, including Piett himself.

Piett had ordered the ship to return to the capital; the official word was that they would have a memorial service and interment of the Dark Lord there. In reality, Piett reasoned that it was likely that the emperor was returning there with his captives, and the trajectory calculated by the helmsman of the *Executor* confirmed the admiral's suspicions.

The man who had once been Darth Vader was trying his best to rest his newly made body while the ship was en route to Coruscant. Despite the fact that he was tired, sleep would not come easily to him, for the thoughts and fears of his children were bombarding his mind endlessly. What sleep he did have was full of frightening images and long repressed memories. *Memories of Padmé*...her image seemed to figure very prominently in his mind, and it made him think that there was a reason for that. *Where are you, Padmé?* He thought in anguish, agonizing over the same question that had plagued him since finding her empty grave. Only this time, the response was not mere silence; this time he sensed something, as if somewhere out there someone was answering his question. *Padmé? Are you out there? Can you hear me?*

His wife had not been a Jedi, nor was she able to manipulate the Force. Yet he had always been able to communicate with her, to sense her moods. He remembered vividly experiencing what turned out to be her morning sickness early on in her pregnancy with the twins. And now he was sensing her again....and she was trying to tell him something. What was she telling him? Where was she? Why after all these years of silence was he finally able to feel her presence again?

Admiral Piett stopped outside of the quarters that he had brought Lord Vader to the previous night. He hesitated before entering, not wishing to disturb his rest. He needn't have concerned himself, for within a moment or two the door opened and Vader stood before him.

"Oh, I hope I'm not disturbing you," Piett said in surprise.

Vader shook his head. "No, come in."

Piett followed him inside. "Have you managed to get some rest?" he asked.

"Yes," Vader replied. "But not much. What is that in your hands?" he asked, looking down at the bundle in Piett's hands.

"Oh, this," Piett replied, almost forgetting about the bundle. "These are for you," he said, holding it out to Vader.

"What is it?" Vader asked, taking the package from the admiral.

"Clothes," Piett replied. "Something a little more appropriate for Anakin Skywalker."

"What did you call me?" he asked.

"Anakin Skywalker," replied Piett. "You aren't going to deny that you *are* Anakin Skywalker, are you?"

Vader walked away from Piett, deep in thought. *Am I Anakin Skywalker? Has finding my children again destroyed Darth Vader irrevocably?* He thought back to the vision he'd had of his daughter earlier; she was sitting in a cell block, alone and terrified, and he had comforted her. *And what had he told her? Who had you told her you were? Anakin Skywalker...*

He turned back to Piett. "I'm not sure I can," he replied.

Piett smiled. "You are *not* Darth Vader," he declared. "And it is not just the physical transformation, sir. You have not been the same since learning of the existence of your children."

"No, I have not felt the same either," Vader admitted. "It is as though their existence has eroded the darkness within me... and changed me."

"There's no doubt it has changed you, my lord," Piett concurred.

"Don't call me that any more, Piett; Darth Vader is dead. Henceforth I am Anakin Skywalker once again."

Piett smiled. "It is an honor to know you, Anakin. Welcome back."

Anakin smiled too. "It is good to be back." His smile soon faded as the reality of his children's plight entered his mind. "How soon will we arrive at Coruscant?"

"Within the hour," Piett replied. "What do you plan to do when we get there?"

"Get back my children," Anakin responded. "And avenge my family."

"Avenge?" Piett asked. "Exactly how do you plan to do that?"

"I think you know, Piett," Anakin replied.

Piett nodded. "In that case, I'm glad I had the foresight to keep this," he said, pulling a lightsaber out from the pile of clothes. "I thought you may need it."

Anakin took it from Piett and looked down at it in his hand. He activated it, watching the red blade's ominous glow. "This is the lightsaber of a Sith," he said, reflecting on how many lives had been struck down by the blood red blade. "But perhaps it is fitting that it be used to destroy the Sith forever."

Piett did not fully understand the mysterious nature of the Force, nor the subtleties of the Dark Side versus the Light; but he knew enough to understand that the Emperor was the embodiment of Darkness, evil incarnate. If Anakin Skywalker was determined to destroy that evil, then he would do all that he could to help him.

“Tell me what you need,” Piatt said at last.

Chapter 24

CHAPTER 24

Luke could feel the Darkness that was the galactic emperor even before he entered the throne room. He was escorted by the two guards who had taken him from his cell. Leia was alone, and more scared than she was willing to admit. Luke was worried that his sister would be far more vulnerable to the emperor's inducement than he himself was. Palpatine would no doubt sense the depth of Leia's resentment of their father, and use it against her. Luke felt certain that the two of them had been separated deliberately so that they would not be able to draw upon one another for strength. *Divide and conquer...* While Luke felt his own Jedi training would afford him a better chance of resisting the emperor, he feared that Leia's chances were far less certain. He could only hope that her own strength of character would empower her.

Finally they reached their destination. Luke braced himself as the guards stood aside, allowing him to enter alone. The room was dimly lit, which Luke found most fitting, with a high ceiling. He looked around the room briefly, and then at the being that sat watching him from the other end of the room.

"Welcome to my home, young Skywalker," the emperor said at last, his voice full of age and latent malevolence. "I trust your journey here was not too unpleasant."

"Not if you consider being locked in a cell pleasant," Luke countered calmly. "Where is Leia?" he demanded next.

"She is being escorted from the ship and will soon be enjoying the hospitality of my home," Palpatine answered. "As I hope you will also when we are concluded with our meeting."

Luke lifted an eyebrow. "Is that what you call this? A meeting?"

"Call it whatever you wish," Palpatine replied amiably. "I have looked forward to meeting you for a long time. And you have a twin sister as well. Most unexpected, but delightful nonetheless."

"What is it you want from us?" Luke asked.

"Nothing more than a friendly chat," Palpatine replied with a reptilian smile. "You know, young Luke, I have been a dear friend of your father's since he was a young boy."

"You will be sad to learn that he is dead, in that case," Luke replied carefully.

"Yes, I had been informed of his demise," Palpatine sighed. "Most unfortunate. How fortuitous that our paths should cross at this particular time."

Luke frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"I think you know, Luke," Palpatine replied. "You are very strong, young Skywalker, almost as strong as your father was at your age."

"I am a Jedi," Luke averred confidently, knowing what the emperor was leading to. "Like my father was before you destroyed him."

Palpatine lifted his eyebrows in mock astonishment. "I destroyed him? Oh surely you have it all wrong, Luke. Your father sought me out, confided in me and me alone. He knew that the Jedi were jealous of his abilities and did everything they could to subvert him. Even his master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, turned on him at the end. You know that it was Kenobi who was responsible for putting your father in that breath suit he was forced to live in? Did you know that he mutilated your father and left him to die in the flames of Mustafar?"

Luke did *not* know this; but he could not let this chilling revelation get to him. He knew what the emperor was trying to do, and was not about to take the bait.

"I know my father was once a good man," Luke retorted, fighting to remain calm. "And that it was the Dark Side that turned him into the monster Darth Vader. Obi-Wan was his friend, he would have done everything he could to save him, not destroy him."

Palpatine shook his head. "So naïve," he said. "Just like your father was at your age. I see him in you, Luke, you are much like him. You could be as powerful as he was, with the right training. I can give you that training."

Luke smiled. "Yes, I'm sure you could," he replied. "But I'll have to decline your offer all the same. I have seen the effect your influence produces, and I'm not interested. You won't convert me as you did my father."

Palpatine lifted an eyebrow in disdain. "We shall see about that," he replied, his tone icy all of a sudden. "But it is inconsequential if you refuse, for I have another Skywalker now. Perhaps she is the wiser of the two."

Luke felt the anger rise within him at the thought of Palpatine manipulating his sister. Palpatine could sense it and smiled.

"Such anger," he declared, "such hatred! Yes, young Skywalker, you are very much like your father. Perhaps I shall have two apprentices after all."

Luke had to fight with all that he had not to lunge at the old man, but he knew that Palpatine was goading him, trying to get him to attack in a fit of anger. Was this the sort of torment his father had been put through?

"Return to your cell now, Luke," Palpatine announced, signaling for the guards to enter. "I wish to have a conversation with your sister now."

"Stay away from her!" Luke shouted, unable to control himself any longer.

"There is only one way that I will do that, and you know what that is," he replied. "I will have one of you, make no mistake. I don't really care which one. If you will not join me, then perhaps she will."

Luke felt the guards at his side and grab him by the arms. They turned him around roughly and shoved him towards the door. *I have to do something to save her...* Luke thought frantically. *Leia is not strong enough to withstand his exploitation. I have to help her before it's too late...*

Chapter 25

CHAPTER 25

Anakin Skywalker paced up and down the bridge, much as he had done when he was known as Darth Vader. He wore the clothing that Piett had provided; clothing that he'd had the requisition droids put together specifically for him. It was not exactly the Jedi robes he'd worn at one time, but it was close enough. Black trousers, a black tunic, belt and boots; all that was missing was his Jedi cloak.

Piett had explained to the crew that Anakin was an important Imperial dignitary they were transferring to Coruscant. No one questioned it, for none of them would have guessed that he had in fact been Darth Vader.

Anakin had sensed the turmoil his children were going through, and it only served to make the journey longer. He feared for his daughter far more than his son, for she was so much like him in her predilection for anger. If Palpatine sensed this in her, which he no doubt would, it could be disastrous. All Palpatine needed to do was to add fuel to the already existing hatred Leia felt for Darth Vader. Palpatine was a master of manipulation; Anakin knew this from bitter experience. Leia was in a dangerous position, and Anakin knew it. *What if he tells her about Padmé? What if he tells her about Mustafar?* There would be no chance for her to accept him if he knew that. Not only that, her hatred for him could lead her to the same path he had once embarked upon, the path that destroyed him.

"What is the ETA?" Anakin asked, his patience wearing thin.

"We've just made the reversion to sublight," Piett told him. "We will be there soon, sir."

Anakin nodded. *I just hope it's soon enough.*

Leia couldn't remember ever being so frightened. Even when she was sitting in the detention block on the Death Star, she hadn't been this terrified. What scared her most was that she had not seen Luke since he had been removed from their cell. What had happened to her brother? She felt certain that he had been taken to the emperor; but what the result of that meeting was; she did not want to consider. Was Luke right about the emperor? Was he truly responsible for what had happened to their father? *Their father...* she could not get the image of his eyes from her mind. Luke's eyes... *was he aware of what was going on? Was he coming to help them?* Leia wanted to believe with all her heart that her father was redeemed, that he was the good man he once was; but she just couldn't quite bring herself to do so. There was too much history between them, too much pain. How could she ever get past that?

Leia's ruminations were interrupted by the sound of the door being activated. She looked up and saw two scarlet robed guards enter the cell, pointing their force pikes at her.

"Come with us," they commanded.

Leia could feel the fear inside her tightening in her stomach. She stood up and walked over to the door. She straightened her shoulders and stood up as tall as her 5 feet would permit,

determined not to let her fears show. she walked with her head held high between the two guards, wondering if she would ever see her brother again, see Han Solo again... the thought of him threatened to cause her to lose her composure. She missed him terribly. *I never told him how I truly feel about him... and now I may never get the chance.*

The guards stopped and Leia realized that they had reached the throne room. She swallowed hard, determined to face the emperor with the same courage and self-confidence that she had faced Darth Vader on numerous occasions. *He will not win... I am not my father...*

The doors opened and Leia was pushed inside by the two guards who took up their positions on either side of the door. She took a deep breath, bracing herself mentally for what she was about to face. She reached out her mind, trying to use the Force to seek out her brother, even her father; but the dark presence in the room was too strong, and it blocked her feeble attempts.

"Welcome, Princess," the emperor greeted her at last. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last."

Leia did not move, nor did she speak. All she could do was watch as the old man moved toward her, a repulsive smile on his loathsome face.

"I had a most interesting chat with your brother," he continued. "I'm sure our conversation will be equally fascinating; perhaps even more so."

"I have nothing to say to you," Leia said at last, trying desperately to keep control of her emotions.

"No? Well that's of no consequence; you see, I have much that I want to say to you." Palpatine looked at Leia closely, his yellow eyes examining her face with great interest. "Has anyone ever told you how much you look like your mother?"

No....not my mother... don't bring up my mother...

"Yes," she said simply.

"I'm amazed that never occurred to your late father," he continued, as though he were making a simple observation. "The resemblance is really quite remarkable. Of course, he really had no use for her in the end anyway."

Leia knew that he was trying to goad her. Intuitively she knew that he was willing to say anything to get her angry; but his words were so hateful, so ugly, that she was having difficulty not letting them get to her.

"You don't know anything about my parents," she said, managing to keep her voice even.

Palpatine smiled again. "Well you see, that's where you're wrong, Princess. I knew your mother very well. Very well indeed. She was a great lady, a great stateswoman. And of course I knew your father. I watched him grow up from a young boy of 9. I knew of their secret marriage too."

Leia sighed, feigning boredom. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"Because I know you need to know what happened," he told her. "You need to know who your parents truly were, and why your father became the monster you hate."

“And you’re the one to tell me the truth?” she asked scornfully. “You must take me for quite a fool if you think I’d believe a word you say.”

“No, I don’t think you’re a fool,” he replied. ‘And perhaps you wouldn’t believe me. But there is someone who you would believe, someone who knows better than anyone what happened all those years ago.’ Palpatine turned his attention to the guards at the door. “Bring in the prisoner.”

Prisoner? Leia felt her heart sink as she realized who it must be that the emperor was referring to. They had captured her father, who had undoubtedly been too weak to put up a fight. Now Palpatine had them all in his grasp. *So much for the big rescue I was hoping for.* She heard the doors open once again and turned, expecting to see her father being brought in. What she did see took her breath away.

“Mother?” Leia gasped, hardly able to believe her eyes. “MOTHER?”

Anakin Skywalker stopped dead in his tracks, his heart pounding hard within his chest. *Padmé....Padmé is in danger... she is on Coruscant... Palpatine has her... he has my whole family now...*

He turned and looked at Piett, his eyes reflecting his terror. “Get a shuttle ready,” he said. “I’m going down there.”

Chapter 26

CHAPTER 26

Leia stared in disbelief at the woman who stood in binders flanked by two guards. There was no doubt in Leia's mind that she was looking at her mother; but something was wrong with her. Very wrong. She did not react at all to seeing Leia. In fact, her face registered no expression at all.

"What have you done to her?" cried Leia, rushing over to her mother.

"I have done nothing to her," Palpatine replied. "Your mother has been in my care for many years now. You see, when your father left her, alone, pregnant, and suffering from his abuse, she had an emotional collapse. She's been a virtual invalid for years now."

Leia felt a rush of hatred fill her as she looked into her mother's vacant eyes. *You did this to her?*

"Mother, can you hear me?" Leia asked. "Mother, it's me, it's Leia!"

Padmé turned her eyes and looked at Leia, but no recognition registered on her face. Leia could feel her throat constricting with grief, seeing what had become of her beautiful mother. *Because of him... he did this to her... the monster did this...*

"Did... was Vader aware of her condition?" Leia asked, not taking her eyes away from her mother.

Palpatine smiled, his plan was working exactly as he had intended.

"Of course he knew," he lied. "Not that he cared. He came here when he found out about your brother and you, tried to find out from her where to find you. She of course knew nothing, for you and your brother were taken from her when you were born; she was in no condition to care for you. But that didn't stop him; I'm afraid she has only recently been released from the hospital. As you know, your father was rather short on patience."

Leia looked at her mother, desperate to connect to her; to ask her if what Palpatine was saying was true. *It can't be true... it can't be... surely even Vader would not stoop so low...*

"Tell me he's lying, Mother," Leia pleaded. "Tell me none of this is true!"

Padmé could only stand and look at her daughter, for the drugs in her bloodstream prevented her from doing anything else. She could hear what was being said, and even understand it; but Palpatine had made sure that she was unable to react on any level. She wanted to communicate with her daughter, wanted to embrace her and tell her that the emperor was evil incarnate, and not to succumb to his lies; but she could not. All she could do was stand in a frustrated daze, utterly helpless.

"I am not lying, Princess," Palpatine said. "If you knew your father at all, you will know that he was more than capable of this. Padmé has always been special to me, that is why I took it upon myself to care for her."

Leia felt the hot tears rolling down her cheeks as she thought of the hell her mother's life had been for the past 2 decades. Bad enough that her babies had been taken from her, but her life since then had been one of loneliness and disillusionment. All thanks to one man: her father.

"Why have you brought her here?" Leia asked wearily, turning to the emperor. "What is it you hope to accomplish by this?"

"I want you to help me, Leia," Palpatine responded immediately. "I know your father isn't dead; your thoughts are far too easily read. No doubt he will come here to try to take you and your brother back, and perhaps even your mother as well, since you and Luke now know of her existence. I need you to help me stop him."

Leia frowned, her mind utterly confused. *Was this what Luke was trying to warn her about? Is he trying to lure me to the Dark Side?* No...he wants me to stop Vader... and Vader is the Dark Side. *So what side is Palpatine on? Why does he want to destroy his apprentice?*

"You are wondering what my motivation is, aren't you?" Palpatine asked. "It's very simple. He has chosen to become my enemy by his treachery. Yes, I know what transpired on Kamino. I know of his plans to use you and your brother to destroy me. He underestimates me if he thinks that I am fooled so easily."

"So what do you want from me?" Leia asked. "I'm no Jedi."

"No, but you are very strong with the Force," Palpatine returned. "With the proper training, you could be as strong as your brother, as strong as your father."

Leia couldn't believe what he was saying; how could she be as strong as Luke? As Vader?

"All I want it to avenge my mother for what he has done," Leia said at last, unwittingly revealing to the emperor that his suspicions about her father's death were correct. "I hate him, I want him to pay for all the pain he has caused my family."

Palpatine smiled. "I think we have reached an agreement, Princess."

Using the Force, Luke Skywalker had managed to open the door to his cell. He was unarmed, however; for the guards had confiscated his lightsaber while they were still on Kamino. *First order of business...* he thought as he snuck around the corridors of the vast mansion. *A weapon...* Luke relied on his Jedi senses to alert him to anyone coming, and was able to conceal himself in the many doorways and alcoves of the labyrinth-like house.

Suddenly he was struck by a very strong surge in the Force. He leaned against the wall as it washed over him, the intensity and brightness of it unlike anything he had ever experienced. Not even Master Yoda's Force signature had such radiance to it; who could it be? And then Luke knew. *Father?*

Luke moved stealthily around the corner and looked down the corridor. He saw two men standing with their back to him; one was an Imperial officer, and the other was a large man dressed all in black. Luke soon as he realized who it was, for at that moment the large figure in black turned to him, flashing a brilliant smile in his direction as he did so.

"Luke!" Anakin said as he approached his son. He was so relieved to see him that he threw his arms around him, not even thinking that his son had not yet fully accepted him. "I'm so

relieved!”

If Luke had still harbored any doubts about his father’s redemption, they were eliminated irrevocably with that simple gesture of love. He embraced his father back, knowing that this man truly was his father now, in every conceivable way.

“Where is your sister?” Anakin asked, pulling back and looking at Luke’s face.

“I don’t know,” Luke replied. “We were separated hours ago.”

Anakin exchanged a look with Piett.

“Where’s is the emperor?” asked Piett. “Have you seen him since being here?”

Luke nodded. “Yes, I have,” he replied. ‘He... he’s trying to turn one of us so the Dark Side,’ he added solemnly. “I’m afraid for Leia, really afraid. She has so much anger in her, so much resentment.”

Anakin nodded. “I know, she is so much like me it scares me,” he said with a frown. “Palpatine must also know this. I sense that he will focus his attention on her, Luke. We must get to her before he manages to sway her. This is a dangerous time for her.”

“I won’t let anything happen to her, Father,” Luke said, using the appellation for the first time.

Anakin smiled, loving the sound of it. He put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “No, neither will I. There’s more Luke; your mother is here as well. I sensed her presence before we even reached orbit. She is here, and she too is in danger.”

Luke frowned. “Palpatine will not get away with this,” he said in a low voice.

“Are you armed?” Anakin asked.

“No,” Luke replied. “They took my lightsaber back on Kamino. I was just trying to find a weapon when I found you.”

Anakin turned to Piett. “Good thing one of us was thinking,” he said as Piett handed Luke a blaster. “Are you ready?” he asked.

Piett hoisted the blaster he’d brought with him. “Absolutely,” he replied. Anakin nodded. “Let’s find them. I will not allow Palpatine to tear my family apart again.”

Chapter 27

CHAPTER 27

Padmé watched as her daughter conferred with the emperor, her mind fighting against the effects of the drugs in her system. She knew that Palpatine was doing his best to turn Leia to the Dark Side; even in her haziness she knew. What possible reason could he have for doing this? What had happened to Vader? Palpatine had said that he was on his way here, now. She wished with all her heart that she could shake herself out of the stupor the drugs had reduced her to; Leia needed her, and if Vader were here, he needed to be warned. But there was nothing she could do in her present state.

“What will become of my mother if I decide to help you?” Leia asked at last. “If I help you destroy Vader, will you release her to my care?”

Palpatine smiled. “If that is what you wish,” he replied. “Of course I will release her to you. It is right that she be with you, after all.”

Don't listen to him Leia... no matter what he tells you, don't listen to him!

Leia frowned, unnerved by the unsolicited thought. *Luke, is that you?*

Palpatine watched her closely, sensing that she was in silent communication with someone. *Vader...*

“Something wrong, Princess?” he asked, all trace of benevolence gone from his face.

Leia looked at him and for an instant saw sheer evil in his yellow eyes. It chilled her, and she took a step back from him. Palpatine realized his misstep, and assumed his kindly attitude.

“I understand that this must be very upsetting to you,” he said, his voice soothing once again. “But you can trust me, Princess.”

“Can I? she asked as reason started to fight its way through her anger.” I’m not so sure...”

Palpatine felt a surge of anger through him as he saw his golden opportunity slipping away. “Well you really have no choice in the matter, Princess,” he said, his voice edged with anger. “You see, I have your brother and your mother in my custody. If you value their lives, you *will* join me.”

Leia shook her head, realizing that she had backed herself into a corner. He had been manipulating her all along, *just as Luke said he would...*

“Guards, take Senator Amidala back to her cell,” Palpatine announced at last. “And arrange for her execution at once.”

“NO!” Leia cried. “Don’t hurt her! I will do anything you ask, just don’t hurt my mother any more!”

Palpatine smiled. "You are finally starting to see things my way," he taunted her. "Very good. You *will* make a fine apprentice."

Anakin and Luke stopped in their tracks and looked at one another in alarm.

"What is it?" Piett asked anxiously. "What's wrong?"

They had both felt a strong surge of terror emanating from Leia.

"We have to hurry," Anakin said. "Leia is in trouble. Follow me."

Anakin lead his son and Piett to the room where Palpatine was holding Leia and Padmé. All of them realized that the room would be heavily guarded, and so they split up.

Anakin had been to the home of his former master before, many times, and knew his way around well. He was one of the few people who were aware of the secret passageway that lead into the throne room, and was glad of that knowledge now. The closer he approached the room, the stronger the feelings of darkness grew. What troubled him was that these feelings were not merely emanating from the emperor, but from his daughter as well. Anakin frowned, fighting his own rage to press on. He slipped through the dark, narrow passageway silently, his hand on his lightsaber. Finally he reached the end of the passage and slipped into the shadows of the large room. He quickly surveyed the situation, making note of the lay out of the room and the position of the people within it. He stopped and nearly gave himself away when he saw his wife. Though he had sensed her presence, the sight of her after so many years made him stop, his knees growing weak. *Padmé...he thought what has he done to you?*

As Anakin was making his way towards the room, Piett and Luke dispatched the guards outside the door with their blasters easily, gaining entry into the room.

"Luke!" Leia called, relieved to see her twin. Luke gave her a quick look before turning his attention to the guards holding his mother captive.

"Let her go," Luke ordered as he and Piett shoved their blasters into the backs of the two guards holding Padmé. The guards stepped back and lifted their pikes to dispatch the two assailants, but didn't have a chance to activate their weapons before they were shot dead.

"An impressive display, young Skywalker," Palpatine said from his throne. "But surely you realize that even with your crude weapons you are no match for me."

"Your overconfidence will be your undoing, Palpatine," Luke retorted as Leia rushed over to their mother. Piett covered Luke as the young Jedi approached the throne. "You're reign of terror is over, your majesty," he added, pointing his blaster at the emperor. Palpatine did not flinch under the young Jedi's threats; in fact, he smiled.

"You'll forgive me if I remain skeptical," Palpatine remarked. He looked in the direction of Piett who stood with Leia and Padmé, and, with a small movement of his hand, sent Piett flying across the room and against the wall.

"Kill me, Skywalker," goaded Palpatine. "Go ahead. You're half way to the Dark Side if you kill an unarmed man in cold blood."

Luke felt confused, and hated the emperor for muddling his thoughts this way.

Palpatine sensed the young man's conflicted emotions, and took full advantage of it. "Perhaps you are not as sure as yourself as you think, Skywalker," he goaded. "I sense tremendous anger in you, tremendous hatred. They make you strong, don't they? Can you feel the power they give you?"

"Don't listen to him, Luke."

Luke turned to see his father emerge from the shadows of the room. Palpatine took the boy's moment of distraction to send him across the room with a bolt of blue energy. Luke crashed against the wall, as his sister and Pielt rushed to his aide.

"So, my apprentice," Palpatine said, turning to face Anakin. "You have betrayed me."

Anakin took a moment to look towards his son, and then back to his master, his blue eyes cold as a glacier. He shook his head. "It was I that was betrayed," He retorted. "You used me, you lied to me... all these years you have treated me no better than a slave. But no more. It is over now, my master. You will pay for the pain you have inflicted upon my family."

Anakin's lightsaber glowed ominously in his hand as he approached the throne. Palpatine looked at the red blade without a trace of emotion in his yellow eyes.

"You think it's so easy, do you?" Palpatine retorted, slowly rising to his feet. "You underestimate my powers, Skywalker!" he said, punctuating his sentence with a blast of Sith lightning. Anakin used his lightsaber to deflect the lightning and push it back at the emperor. This enraged Palpatine and he came back with another more potent bolt.

"We have to help him," Luke said as he struggled to his feet. "Leia, help me..."

Leia tried to help Luke to his feet, but her brother was still too weak from the electric shock and he crumpled to the floor again. Luke looked up at his sister. "You have to help him, Leia," he said. "The blaster... get the blaster!"

Leia was torn. She looked over at where Anakin and Palpatine were engaged in a battle of mortal proportions. On the floor mere half a meter from her feet was the blaster that Luke had dropped when he had crashed against the wall. She bent over and picked it up, still trying to decide what to do.

"Do it, Leia!" Luke urged. "Kill him!"

But before Leia could even take aim, the sound of blaster fire was heard from the other side of the room. Leia and Luke both looked over to see Palpatine face down on the floor.

Anakin was just as surprised as his children, and looked over to see Padmé holding a blaster.

"Padmé," he sighed, dropping his lightsaber and running over to her.

He took her by the shoulders and looked into her dark eyes. "Padmé, you're alive... you're alive!" he exclaimed, holding her close to him.

Padmé dropped the blaster to the floor and went limp in his arms.

Anakin picked her up and carried her over to where their children were watching in astonishment.

“What’s happened to her?” he asked, looking at Leia. “What has he done to her?”

Leia looked up at her father, seeing the look of anguish in his eyes. *He loves her... he adores her... how could I have believed that monster for a moment?*

“I... I don’t know,” she stammered at last. “I assumed that...that this was somehow your doing,” she admitted.

Anakin frowned. “What?” he cried. “Did Palpatine tell you that?”

Leia nodded, her eyes fixed on her mother’s face. “Yes... he told me that Mother had been in his care for many years....that she had recently been hospitalized because you had... brutalized her...”

Anakin closed his eyes as he absorbed this information. *So this was your plan, was it Palpatine? To augment the hatred my daughter feels for me by inventing lies about her mother?*

“It’s not true, is it?” Luke asked joining his sister, feeling utterly drained. Leia put her arm around his waist to support him.

Anakin opened his eyes and looked down at his wife. He shook his head. “No, of course it isn’t,” he said softly. ‘I’ve been searching for your mother for months. I thought she was dead until recently.’ He looked up at his children. “We need to get her to a medic,” he said. “Right now.”

“What happened?” Piett asked as he approached the family, rubbing the back of his head.

“The emperor is dead,” Luke told him. “Mother killed him.”

Piett’s eyes widened in surprise as he looked down at the unconscious form of Padmé Skywalker. “What? How? I thought she was...”

“We don’t know anything at this point,” Anakin put in. “Except that she needs medical attention.”

Piett picked up the blaster that Luke had dropped earlier. “I’ll get us out of here,” he announced heading for the door.

“No, this way,” said Anakin. “There’s a secret passage that leads to a landing platform. Behind the throne.”

“I see it,” Piett said. “Follow me.”

Chapter 28

CHAPTER 28

Anakin and his family along with Firmus Piett made their way to the landing platform where they commandeered one of the shuttles located there.

“You know how to fly one of these?” Anakin asked his son.

“I’m sure I can figure it out,” Luke replied. He and Piett left for the cockpit, leaving Anakin alone with his still unconscious wife and his daughter.

Leia watched as her father spoke softly to her mother, his eyes conveying the deep love he felt for her.

“You really love her, don’t you?” Leia asked at last.

Anakin looked up at his daughter. “That surprises you, doesn’t it?”

Leia shrugged, feeling uneasy at her father’s ability to read her emotions.

“I guess it does,” she admitted.

Anakin looked back at his wife, weary with sparring with his daughter.

“So what happened?” she asked next.

“What do you mean?” he asked, not looking up at her.

“If you loved her so much, why did you become Darth Vader? A creature incapable of loving anyone?”

Anakin looked up at his daughter. “It’s a very long story, Leia,” he replied. “My reasons for turning to the Dark Side are not simple ones.”

“I didn’t think so,” she replied. “Was it the power? The position Palpatine offered you?”

Anakin frowned and shook his head. “The only power that I wanted in the beginning was the power to save your mother,” he told her. “I didn’t care about anything else.”

“I don’t understand,” Leia replied. “Save her? From what?”

Anakin began to reply but stopped. *No... it can't be...*

Leia frowned, sensing her father’s anxiety level shoot up exponentially. “What is it?” she asked. “What’s wrong now?”

Anakin looked at his daughter. “It’s Palpatine... he’s still alive.”

Leia’s eyes widened in alarm. “What?” she cried. “How do you know?”

“I can sense it,” Anakin replied. “His dark presence in the Force is unmistakable. He is alive, Leia. He may have been knocked unconscious, but he isn’t dead. I can feel it.”

Leia felt as though all warmth had just drained from her body.

“What are we going to do?” she asked quietly.

Anakin looked down at Padmé’s face. “I won’t let him hurt any of you again, Leia,” he replied assertively. “I must face him myself. Alone.”

“What are you talking about, Father?”

Anakin and Leia looked up to see Luke standing there. “We’re on board the *Executor*,” he explained. “Who are you going to face, Father?”

“The emperor,” Anakin replied. “He’s still alive, Luke.”

“That can’t be!” Luke exclaimed. “He was dead, I saw him!”

Anakin shook his head. “No, he is not dead,” he replied. “I can sense his presence, the darkness that he embodies. I must destroy him once and for all.”

“I’m coming with you,” Luke declared.

Anakin carried his wife through the corridors of the *Executor*, ignoring the curious stares of the crewmen they passed. Luke and Leia followed behind, while Piett headed for the bridge.

“Can I help you?” a medical droid asked as the Skywalkers entered the sick bay.

“Attend to this patient,” Anakin ordered as he lay Padmé down on one of the diagnostic beds. “She has been unconscious for almost an hour.”

The medical droid approached the bed as Anakin stood back, his arms folded over his chest.

“Father, I’m not letting you go after Palpatine alone,” Luke said as he stood next to his father.

Anakin didn’t take his eyes from his wife. “No Luke,” he replied. “You are not ready for this. Besides, you have no lightsaber.”

“I can make one,” Luke replies. “You must have enough materials on this ship to build a dozen lightsabers!”

“True, but that still doesn’t mean you’re coming with me,” Anakin replied.

“You’re being unreasonable!” Luke protested. “You can use my help! Why can’t you admit that you need my help?”

Anakin looked at his son. “I won’t risk losing you again, Luke,” he said simply. “I’ve come close too many times. This fight is between the emperor and me. I have a personal score to settle.”

“Don’t you think that we have one too?” Leia spoke up, much to Anakin’s surprise. “After what he did to Mother? To all of us? This is our fight too, as much as yours.”

Anakin looked from his son to his daughter, sensing that he was losing the battle. “I hope you’re not planning on coming too,” he said to Leia.

“No, I will only be in the way,” she admitted. “I have no skill with the lightsaber. But Luke does. Take him with you. Please.”

Anakin was surprised by Leia’s vehemence. He looked down at Padmé, reflecting just how much the two women in his life were alike. *Negotiators both...*

“Very well,” Anakin said at last. “Luke will come with me. I don’t suppose you know how to build a lightsaber, do you boy?” he asked, a small smile on his face.

“No,” Luke admitted. “But if you show me I will remember.”

Anakin nodded. He bent down and kissed Padmé softly on the mouth. “I’ll be back, my angel,” he told her softly. “I promise.”

“Come then,” he said. “Let’s get to it.”

Leia stayed with Padmé while Anakin took his son to the machining station in the very bowels of the great star destroyer. Just as Luke had predicted, it was well stocked both with materials and tools.

“Is this where you built your lightsaber?” Luke asked his father.

“No,” he replied. ‘This ship isn’t that old. But I had the materials brought on board in case I ever needed to repair it, or build another one. I was rather careless when I was a young man, Luke,’ he remembered with a smile. “I can’t count how many lightsabers I destroyed or lost over the years.”

Luke smiled, enjoying the first father and son moment he’d ever experienced. “So how is it done?”

Anakin looked through the drawers of materials, until he found what he was looking for.

“I built my first lightsaber when I was 9,” he told his son as he assembled the materials needed. “Seems like another lifetime now.”

“You were nine when you began your apprenticeship?” Luke asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “A little old, actually; but Qui-Gon Jinn, my first master, felt certain that I was the Chosen One of Jedi legend. He went against the Jedi Council to train me,” he related as he showed Luke how to assemble the weapon’s energy chamber.

“I thought Obi-Wan trained you,” Luke commented as he assisted his father.

“Careful with that,” Anakin cautioned. ‘That’s the heart of the saber. I’m afraid it will be red, Luke,’ he said, looking up at his son. “Siths don’t use any other color.”

Luke frowned. “Well, I suppose I have no choice,” he replied. “I just hope I can get back the one I lost on Kamino. It was yours, you know.”

“It was?” Anakin asked. He thought back to the last time he had used his Jedi saber... and closed his mind on the memory. *Mustafar...*

“Obi-Wan said you’d want me to have it,” Luke explained.

Anakin nodded. "He was right about that, son," he replied, not wishing to get into a discussion about the circumstances under which Obi-Wan had come to be in possession of Anakin's saber.

"Here's where it gets tricky," Anakin explained. "The crystals must be lined up precisely or else you'll blow your head off the first time you activate the matrix."

"Okay..." Luke replied uneasily. "And how exactly do you do that?"

Anakin smiled. "Use the Force," he said simply. "Can you do it?"

Luke nodded. "I think so," he replied.

"No son, do it, don't just think you can," Anakin advised.

"You sound like Master Yoda," Luke commented.

Anakin smiled. "First time for everything I suppose," he said.

Anakin watched as his son finished assembling the lightsaber with his guidance.

"Well done, my young padawan," Anakin said with a smile as Luke activated the new saber.

Luke smiled. "Padawan?" he asked.

Anakin nodded. "A Jedi term for apprentice," he said.

"I see," Luke replied. He deactivated the saber. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," he replied. "I'm ready. Let's check in on your mother first, and then we'll head for Coruscant."

Chapter 29

CHAPTER 29

Luke and his father had been busy constructing a new lightsaber for nearly 2 hours. By the time they returned to the sick bay, Anakin felt a familiar presence in the Force; Padmé was awake.

"Anakin, a word with you please," Piett called as he saw the two Skywalkers coming down the corridor.

"You go ahead, Luke," Anakin instructed his son. "I'll catch up to you in moment."

Luke did not need to be told twice, for he was as anxious as his father to see how Padmé was.

"What is it?" Anakin asked.

"We received a message from Coruscant a moment ago," Piett related. "It seems the emperor is indeed alive, and is threatening to send his personal flotilla of TIE fighters to destroy this vessel if you do not surrender yourself immediately."

Anakin snorted in response. "Let him try," he replied. "A swarm of gnats against a rancor. I will be paying the emperor a visit; he needn't be concerned about that."

Piett couldn't help but smile. "So what message should I send in response?"

"Tell him to send his fleet," Anakin replied. "If he thinks he can intimidate me again, he's got another thing coming. That will serve my purpose as well, for he will not expect us if we refuse his order."

Piett nodded. "Very good, sir," he approved. "I shall be sure that the shields are at maximum power and our gunners are ready for a fight."

"They could use the practice," Anakin replied as he walked away, hearing Piett chuckle to himself as he did so.

Anakin stopped in the doorway of the sickbay, uncertain if he ought to intrude upon the reunion within. Luke and Leia sat on either side of Padmé's bed, each of them holding one of her hands as she looked up at each of them in turn, her dark eyes shining with love and joy. Anakin watched as each of his children expressed their relief and joy at seeing their mother alive.

He felt his heart ache to think that it was he who responsible for keeping the three of them apart for so long. If he had only listened to his wife on that day so long ago when she had begged him to come away with him, how different everyone's life would have turned out. He would have been there to see his children as they took their first steps, learned to string words together into a sentence, to hear them call him Daddy...

But no... You chose the Darkness instead... you chose Palpatine over your family...
Anakin could feel the rage bubbling up within him, making him wonder if indeed he had eradicated the Darkness from him completely. The hatred he felt for Palpatine was powerful, and potent, and filled his soul utterly, pushing out anything and everything else at that moment, his whole being bent on revenge... and then Padmé's eyes met his.

That moment he felt his anger melt away, retreat into the shadows of Darkness that still lingered around his battered heart. She had always been the only one to keep his demons at bay; when he lost her, all hope of redemption had been lost as well. But now she was back. She was alive. And she was looking at him as she once had, all those years ago. *I am not worthy of her... not after everything I've done. I was never worthy of her.*

Anakin stepped into the room; his steps had never been so unsure, and moved over to where his wife lay watching him.

"Hello," he said simply, awkwardly. His hand moved to run it through his hair, a gesture he had used when he'd had a full head of thick unruly hair, a gesture of nervousness, of self doubt. Now all he felt was the blond stubble that had begun to sprout on his newly healed scalp.

"Hello," Padmé replied. Anakin could sense that she did not know what to call him, whether he was truly Anakin Skywalker, or, despite his appearance, still the Dark Lord who had ripped her life apart.

"How are you feeling?" he asked the awkwardness reaching palpable proportions.

"I'm okay," she replied. "Better."

"What did he do to you?" he asked bluntly.

Padmé was taken aback by his directness. "He... I was drugged," she replied. 'He found me months ago and kept me prisoner. He was trying to find out what I knew about Luke,' she said looking at her son. "If I knew where he was. I didn't know anything, but he didn't believe me. I think if you hadn't shown up when you did..." She stopped as the horror of her ordeal overwhelmed her.

Anakin frowned; the images and terror she felt flooding through his mind, infuriating him. "Palpatine will pay for what he has done to you, Padmé," he replied, the anger simmering just under the surface. "He will not get away with this."

Padmé was troubled by the look in his eyes, the look of anger that reminded her of that horrible day so long ago. Who was he? Had he been redeemed? Or was there still a Sith lurking behind those brilliant blue eyes?

"Luke told me," she said, looking at her son. "I wish you would reconsider this..."

"There is no other way, Padmé," Anakin interrupted. 'He does not understand anything but violence, and so he shall have it. I swore upon your empty grave that I would avenge you, Padmé, you and our children. And that is exactly what I intend to do.' He turned his eyes to his son. "It's time, Luke," he said.

Luke nodded. "I'm coming," he said. He turned back to his mother and smiled at her. 'It'll be okay,' he told her softly. "I know he is angry right now, but he truly has changed, Mother. I

know it. I can feel it.”

Padmé nodded, trying to take comfort in her son’s declaration. “Be careful,” she said, touching his face.

Luke took his mother’s hand and kissed her palm. “I will,” he said. He turned to his sister. “Take care of each other,” he said as he stood up.

Leia stood up to face her brother. “Please be careful Luke,” she said, embracing him tightly.

“I will,” he told his sister. “See you soon.”

Leia released her brother and looked at the doorway where her father was waiting. She wished she had it in her to reach out to him, but still could not quite manage to do it. She still saw glimpses of Vader in him, no matter what he looked like on the outside.

“Ready?” Luke asked as he met his father at the doorway.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I’m ready.” He looked back up at his daughter and his wife. “We’ll be back soon,” he said, trying to sound optimistic.

Leia nodded. “Good luck,” she said simply.

Anakin smiled, knowing the effort it took for her to even say that much. “Thank you,” replied. Then he and Luke turned and left the room.

Leia turned back to her mother, who seemed lost in thought.

“He has changed,” Padmé said thoughtfully. “Hasn’t he, Leia? He’s not Vader anymore, is he?”

Leia turned back to where her father had stood mere moments ago. “I hope not,” she said softly. “I truly hope not.”

Chapter 30

CHAPTER 30

Anakin and Luke took one of the shuttles from the hangar bay of the *Executor* and, having been given the signal for from the bridge, left the ship. Piett watched them leave, and then gave the signal to raise the shields.

“Prepare the ion cannons,” Piett ordered. “And watch for incoming TIE fighters.”

“TIE fighters sir?” asked the weapons officer. “We’re engaging TIE fighters sir??”

Piett looked at the officer and nodded. “Yes, lieutenant,” he replied. “They are on their way right now to destroy this ship. Would you have us do nothing?”

The officers and crew on board the bridge looked at one another, puzzled and alarmed by their commander’s statement.

“Why are there TIE fighters coming to attack us, sir?” asked one of the younger crew member. “Aren’t we on the same side?”

Piett sighed. “I’m not sure we are, Gareth,” he replied. “The emperor has gone mad... he is no longer capable of ruling the Empire. It is our duty to ensure that he is not allowed to wreak havoc throughout the galaxy in his madness.”

Murmurs of shock and disbelief spread through the bridge. It had been long rumored that the emperor had drifted into senility long ago; was this now the result of his mental condition? Total madness?

“Cannons are fully charged and ready sir,” the weapons officer replied. “Awaiting your command sir.”

Padmé was undergoing a number of tests in the medical bay. She was beginning to grow tired of all the questions and all the scans. Her mind was elsewhere, in the shuttle that was on its way down to Coruscant at that very moment.

She was worried, with good reason. Her son was so young, not much more than a boy; how could he possibly overpower the master of the Sith? Padmé remembered back to that day so long ago on Geonosis when a very young Anakin Skywalker and his master had faced the evil Count Dooku. Anakin had lost his arm that day... and a part of his innocence his well, she suspected. Was Luke about to suffer the same fate?

And what of Anakin? Was he Anakin? Or was he Vader? The moment she and Anakin’s eyes had met, she had felt that old connection, that same fire that had existed between them so long ago. She and Anakin had been soul mates, the passion between them unquenchable and all consuming. All that had changed on that dreadful day when he had turned his back on her and their child. *Because of Palpatine...* would he be able to face his master again without succumbing to those same old temptations? How could he destroy Palpatine without destroying himself as well?

“You’re worried, aren’t you?” Leia asked her Mother as they walked through the corridor of the ship.

Padmé looked at her daughter. “Yes, you are too, aren’t you?”

Leia nodded. “I am,” she admitted. “Luke isn’t ready for this.”

Padmé frowned. “He’s so young,” she said softly. “The same age as your father was when...”

“When he turned to the Dark Side?” finished Leia.

“Yes,” Padmé replied softly. “He was so young... so conflicted.”

“Why did he do it, Mother?” Leia asked at last. “Why did he turn his back on you? On us?”

A look of profound sadness touched Padmé’s face. “It wasn’t as simple as that, Leia,” she replied, reflecting back to that terrible time. *He was terrified of losing me, ever since that dream he had of me dying in childbirth... he was so afraid of it coming true, that he searched for a way to save me... that was what lead him to Palpatine... why I didn’t see what was happening to him? Why didn’t I see it until it was too late...*

Padmé, I need your help. He’s in grave danger.

From the Sith?

From himself . . . Padmé, Anakin has turned to the Dark Side.

You’re wrong! How could you even say that?

I have seen a security hologram of him killing younglings.

Not Anakin! He couldn’t!

He was deceived by a lie. We all were. It appears that the Chancellor is behind everything, including the war. Palpatine is the Sith Lord we’ve been looking for. After the death of Count Dooku, Anakin became his new apprentice.

I don’t believe you... I can’t...

Even after the 22 ensuing years, the pain of that horrifying revelation still tore at her heart. *How could I not have known? I could have saved him... I could have stopped him from going so far that there was no turning back... if only I had seen it before it was too late...*

“Mother? Are you alright?”

Padmé shook herself from her agonizing ruminations and looked at her daughter.

“I’m just remembering, Leia,” she replied. “The past is a painful thing for me, it always will be. I only hope that the future will bring healing to all of us.”

Leia took her mother’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I hope so too,” she said softly.

Anakin and Luke piloted the shuttle to the Imperial palace. Anakin still knew all the security codes of course, so entry onto the property was not a problem.

“How are we going to get in there undetected?” Luke asked looking at his father.

Anakin thought for a moment, and then an idea struck him.

“We’re not,” he said, manning the laser cannon controls. Without another word he opened fire upon the façade of the palace, leveling the front of the building in a matter of moments to a pile of rubble and Dura steel beams.”

“So much for a surprise attack,” Luke muttered as he followed his father out of the shuttle.

Father and son walked side by side, lightsabers poised, carefully sidestepping the still smoldering ruins of the building. Here and there they saw the trapped bodies of the red robed guards, some dead, some almost dead. Alarms were wailing inside the palace as they stepped onto the marble floor and out of the ruins.

“Someone’s coming,” Anakin announced and at once two royal guards came at them, force pikes aimed in their direction. The air sang with bursts of blue energy that issued forth from the pikes. Anakin and Luke deflected the bolts with their lightsabers and advanced upon the guards. Deadly energy filled the air between the combatants as each side used their weapons in an effort to destroy the others. The guards, however, were no match for the two Jedi, and their bodies eventually ended up dead on the floor, their heads beside them.

“Father, look,” Luke said, bending down to pick up an object that had rolled out from under the robes of one of the guards. He held it up and showed it to Anakin. “My lightsaber!”

“I recognize that,” Anakin said with a smile. “I suppose the Force meant for you to have it back.”

Luke smiled and clipped it onto his belt.

Anakin stood still for a moment, reaching out with the Force. *Where are you my master?* It wasn’t long before he was struck with a familiar dark presence. He braced himself, steeling his mind and his soul to face the monster that had owned him for so long.

“This way,” he told his son, heading off down a long corridor.

Palpatine knew that his treacherous apprentice was on his way, he could feel the unmistakable tremor in the Force. The Sith Lord smiled as he sensed the conflict within his apprentice; yes, he had changed, far too much for Palpatine’s liking; but he still sensed traces of Darkness within him. Perhaps Darth Vader was not as dead as Anakin Skywalker seemed to think he was. *And he brought his son with him... so much the better...*

“Welcome, Lord Vader,” Palpatine said smoothly as he sensed the presence of the two Skywalkers in his throne room. He turned slowly in his throne to face them. “How considerate of you to turn yourself in.”

Anakin narrowed his eyes in anger. “I am not here to turn myself in,” he spat. “I think you know why we’re here.”

Palpatine cast a withering look at Luke, and then turned his attention back to Anakin.

“Please enlighten me,” he said sarcastically.

“We’re here to make you pay for what you did to my mother,” Luke said, igniting his lightsaber.

Anakin looked at his son, worried that the boy’s zeal would hamper their efforts.

Palpatine only smiled at Luke’s threat. “Young Skywalker, your feeble skills are no match for the power of the Dark Side,” he stated deprecatingly.

“We shall see,” Anakin said as he lit his own saber. “Whose power prevails, Jedi or Sith.”

Palpatine rose to his feet. “Jedi?” he spat. “I see no Jedi present. Only a pathetic young weakling who calls himself a Jedi because he possesses his father’s lightsaber and a Sith who’s mind is too full of mutiny to know that he will never be anything more than a slave.”

Palpatine knew exactly what words to use to enrage his former apprentice. Anakin approached the throne with his saber held high meaning to decapitate his former master, when the old man produced his own saber from within the sleeve of his voluminous cloak.

“I am no slave,” Anakin said in a voice filled with rage.

Luke could sense his father’s anger, his blind rage, and it scared him. He knew the power of the Dark Side, and how it had once claimed his father; was history bound to repeat itself?

“My father is a Jedi,” Luke said, anxious to diffuse the time bomb. “The Dark Side has no hold on him, or on me. The Sith is no more, Palpatine. You are the last of your kind, and your life is at an end.”

“Is it now?” Palpatine spat. “We shall see!” with that he lunged at Luke, the quickness of his movements belying his tremendous old age.

Luke parried the blows of the old man, surprised by the strength of his attack.

Anakin came at him from the other side, using the Djem So style he had perfected so long ago. Palpatine fought furiously, deflecting the attacks on both sides, looking for a weakness to take advantage of. He felt certain that it would be the boy who would be more easily dispatched; the elder Skywalker was a powerful opponent; he had new strength, new vigor since his surgery, and Palpatine began to worry that he would be no match for the remade Skywalker. No longer was he the dutiful apprentice, the henchman of the Sith. He was the Chosen One, the One who could destroy the Sith.

“Your powers are weak, old man,” Anakin taunted, mindful that he had once used those same words against another master.

“Not so weak as your pitiful son’s,” Palpatine retorted, slicing through Luke’s right arm just above the wrists. Luke screamed in agony, falling to his knees. Anakin staggered for a moment, feeling a rush of pain projected from his son. Palpatine took advantage of his momentary distraction to push him back, forcing Anakin to back pedal.

“Did you think you would get away with your treachery, Lord Vader?” Palpatine hissed as he continued to press his advantage. “Did you think it would be so easy to abandon the Dark Side?”

“I have renounced it,” Anakin retorted, “I reject the Dark Side and all it represents! I will not be a slave to it or to you any longer!”

“You forget, Lord Vader, that I own you,” Palpatine replied. ‘I own your very soul; you will never escape from the Dark Side. It is a part of you, and you a part of it. You cannot exist without one another!’

“Don’t listen to him, Father!” Luke called out to him, fighting to remain conscious. “You are a Jedi! You are better than him! You are the Chosen One!”

Anakin glanced at his son briefly and then back at his foe. He drew strength from his son’s words, and the love he felt behind them, and pushed back at Palpatine. He could feel the Dark Side beckoning him, taunting him as his former master was, tempting him to tap into the tremendous anger that he felt within him; but he resisted it, he forced himself to look beyond it, to embrace the living Force that he knew was his salvation.

“I *am* the Chosen one,” he said, pressing the assault, using wide, sweeping blows in an attempt to overwhelm Palpatine with brute strength. Palpatine became enraged, and attacked again and again, only to have Anakin back and repel each attack, pushing him back with his superior strength.

“You will never destroy the Sith, Jedi!” Palpatine screamed, his rage hitting a pinnacle. He lashed out at Anakin with Sith lightning, only to have it deflect back against him. Palpatine was rapidly losing strength, his own physical limitations no match for the strength of his powerful opponent. Thinking quickly, Palpatine decided upon another strategy.

He glanced over to where Luke was lying in a state of shock, cradling his wounded arm and directed a bolt of sith lightning at the defenseless youth. Anakin grew enraged and pressed the old man harder, trying to keep his attention from Luke.

“You will not harm my child again,” Anakin threatened, his blade a blur of red flashes crashing down up on that of his foe. “You will not harm my family again! This is the end for you, my master!”

With that Anakin used the Force to bring Luke’s lightsaber to his left hand. He ignited it, and the blue blade joined the red in the battle. Sith and Jedi both, blue and red as one, they continued to hammer relentlessly at Palpatine, driven by hatred, driven by love, both emotions giving him seemingly endless strength. Palpatine could sense his end was near, but he fought on, struggling more with each step, with each blow of the sabers that came at him relentlessly, finally driving him to his knees. Dropping his weapon, he knelt there, panting for breath, suffocating as his lungs gasped for air.

Anakin stood over him, lightsabers poised, as a moment from his past flashed before him. Suddenly it was Count Dooku’s face before him, his eyes imploring him for mercy as Palpatine urged him on. *Kill him... he’s too dangerous to let live... KILL HIM!* That was the moment that he had begun his descent into darkness... the moment he allowed Palpatine to control his destiny.

“This is your end, my master,” Anakin said and with one quick movement, severed the dark lord’s head. The head of Palpatine rolled away, his yellow Sith eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling as his decrepit body crumpled to the floor.

Anakin stood for a moment, shaking and exhausted. He looked over at his son, who was pale and unconscious. Anakin turned off the lightsabers and rushed over to him.

“Luke, can you hear me?” he asked as he cradled his son in his arms.

Luke's eyes fluttered open and he looked dazed for a moment. "Father?" He asked in a weak voice.

"I'm here, son," Anakin said, overwhelmed with the fierce sense of love he felt for his boy. "I'm right here, Luke. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm sorry," Luke said softly. "I wanted to help you... I really wanted to be there for you..."

Anakin felt his eyes fill with tears. "You were, Luke," he told him. "You were there for me, in the way that matters the most."

Luke didn't really understand what his father meant, but smiled at him anyway as he drifted off again. Anakin picked his son up in his arms and carried him out the secret exit, tears of love and pride rolling down his face.

Chapter 31

CHAPTER 31

Anakin made it to a Sentinel class shuttle undetected. He realized that he had the advantage of a head start on the imperial guards, but knew that once they broke into the throne room and found the emperor dead, they would begin to comb the area for the assassin. He needed to get off Coruscant as quickly as possible and back to the *Executor* where he hoped he would have sanctuary, no matter how temporary.

Bursting forth from the atmosphere of Coruscant, Anakin piloted the ship towards the star destroyer.

On the bridge of the *Executor*, the tension was thick. Piett had informed the crew of the presence of Anakin Skywalker in their midst, and there was not one crewman or officer who had not heard of the legendary Jedi hero. What they did not know, however, was that this same man was in fact Darth Vader, whom they all believed to be dead.

Padmé and her daughter waited with the bridge crew with grim anticipation. Anakin and Luke had been gone nearly two hours; surely things were over one way or another by now. Finally a familiar voice broke was heard over the comm..

"*Executor* come in, this is Skywalker on Shuttle Hephaestus. I have started my approach. My son is injured, have a medical team ready to receive him. Lower your shields."

Padmé and Leia exchanged a look of fear and anxiety. Luke was hurt.

"Oh Leia," Padmé said, reaching out to her daughter. Leia took her mother's hand as they stood helpless, unable to do anything to expedite the return of the ones they loved.

"We have you on our screen, Hephaestus" the communications officers replied. "But are unable to lower the shields at the moment, sir. We are currently under attack."

Attack? "Repeat message," Anakin asked.

"We are under attack," the officer repeated. "TIE fighters, sir. Give us a few minutes to get the situation under control."

"You have to bring that shuttle on board at once!" Padmé cried. "My son is hurt! He could be dying! Lower the shields!"

"My lady, you know we cannot do that," Piett replied gently. "If we lower our shields, those fighters out there would be able to inflict serious damage to this vessel. Surely you can see the delicacy of the situation."

Padmé knew all that; she was no stranger to battle. But somehow none of that mattered when Luke's life was in the balance.

"Shuttle Hephaestus we will lower the shields when we have eliminated the enemy threat," the comm. officer informed Anakin. "Please keep your distance until such time."

Anakin shook his head. "There's no time," he muttered, hitting the accelerator and directing the shuttle towards the battle. The Sentinel class shuttle fully capable of holding its own in a fight, and this was the reason Anakin had chosen it. Equipped with eight retractable laser cannons mounted on the hull, two concussion missile launchers, a retractable ion cannon, and a pair of retractable repeating blaster cannons mounted beneath the cockpit, its design was sleek and aerodynamic, making it easy to maneuver in tight spaces.

Raising the shields, Anakin dove into the melee, setting his sights on the nearest TIE fighter and blowing it to bits. The *Executor* was pegging off the fighters with relative ease, but it lacked the maneuverability of Anakin's much smaller craft.

"Sir, Shuttle Hephaestus has entered the fight!" reported one of the crewmen on the bridge of the *Executor*.

Piett smiled to himself, not surprised in the least by Anakin's actions.

"Monitor it," Piett ordered. "Make sure he doesn't run into trouble out there."

"Ani, be careful," Padmé muttered quietly.

Leia looked at her. "Ani?" she said.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, his nickname. I always called him that. It's what his mother always called him, short for Anakin."

Leia nodded her understanding, having a hard time the man who was her father had ever earned a nickname of any sort.

"He'll be fine," Leia tried to assure her mother. "From what I've heard, his piloting skills are second to none."

"You're right about that," Padmé concurred. "That doesn't mean I'm not worried."

Leia's statement soon became apparent as the shuttle quickly dispatched several TIE fighters while performing feats of piloting prowess that amazed the bridge crew who were watching the dog fight. Between the ion cannons of the star destroyer and the laser cannons of the shuttle, it wasn't long before the TIE fighters were destroyed.

"Lower the shield and signal the Hephaestus to come aboard," Piett ordered. "And have a medical team standing by."

"Right away sir."

Padmé and Leia left the bridge at once and headed for the hangar bay.

Anakin directed the shuttle into the huge maw of the *Executor*, relieved to be on board at last. While he had actually enjoyed the thrill of the fight, he was worried about his son, and was anxious to get Luke the medical attention he needed as soon as possible.

No sooner had the shuttle settled onto the deck of the hangar bay than a team of medical droids moved forward to receive their patient. Padmé and Leia stood by, both waiting anxiously as the ramp of the shuttle lowered. Even before it came to rest on the deck, the sound of footsteps could be heard on the metal ramp. In a moment Anakin appeared, carrying his son in his arms.

“Luke!!” Padmé cried as she and Leia rushed forward as Anakin laid his son on the stretcher that hovered one meter above the floor.

“What happened to him?” Leia demanded as the medics did a quick examination of Luke’s vital signs.

“Sith lightning,” Anakin replied, not taking his eyes from his son. “He has lost part of his right arm as well. I suspect he’s in a state of shock.”

“Maybe we should let the medics determine his prognosis,” Leia replied.

Anakin looked up at his daughter, annoyed that she questioned him even now. “I know what I’m talking about Leia,” he told her. “I’ve had a few injuries in my life.”

Leia looked up briefly and met her father’s gaze. She could see his indignation, but more than that, she could see his fear, his worry for Luke. *He loves Luke...* she realized to her amazement. *He truly loves him.*

“We have to get him to the medical ward as soon as possible,” the medical droid announced. “He is in a state of shock and needs intervention immediately.”

Anakin exchanged a brief look with Leia, but did not say a word to her. He merely followed the medical team as they escorted his son from the hangar bay.

“Are you alright?”

Anakin turned to see his wife at his side. They had said almost nothing to one another since being reunited, and the tension between them was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“I think so,” he replied. “I’m uninjured, if that’s what you mean.”

Padmé wasn’t sure how to respond to him, she wasn’t sure of anything where he was concerned. While he looked like her Ani, he wasn’t quite Anakin. There was a time when she could read his thoughts as easily as he could read hers; but that was before he had slipped away from her, before Palpatine had destroyed the good man he had once been.

“I... I’m so glad you weren’t hurt,” she said softly.

Anakin looked down at her, unsure how to respond to her. Was she trying to reach out to him? *No, why would she? It’s a miracle she’s even talking to you, after what you did...*

“Thank you,” he said, not knowing what else to say.

Padmé sensed his reticence, and looked away from him. *He is not your Ani*, she told herself. *He never will be again.*

Upon arriving at the medical ward, the droids transferred Luke to a diagnostic bed and hooked him up to an intravenous drip. Anakin watched his arms folded over his chest, trying to contain the emotions that he felt within him. *His son... his beloved son... the only member of his family who accepted him, who loved him...*

Anakin’s hands curled into fists as he thought of how Palpatine had inflicted this upon his son. Despite the fact that the emperor was dead, Anakin’s hatred of him lived on, dark and dangerous. *What if I lose him?* Anakin thought in terror. *How can I go on knowing that I could have prevented his death?*

“How is he?” Padmé asked, approaching the bed.

The medical droid looked up at her. “He is stable,” it pronounced. “We are about to fit him with a prosthetic hand.”

Luke stirred and tried to open his eyes. Padmé took his hand. “It’s okay, Luke,” she said gently. “You’re safe now. You’re going to be fine.”

Luke looked up at his mother, feeling confused and disoriented. “Father?” he asked weakly. “Where is my father?”

Padmé looked up to see Anakin’s eyes soften, and for a moment she saw her Ani in his handsome features.

“I’m here, Luke,” he said as he came over to stand at his son’s side.

“I’m right here.”

“What happened?” Luke asked.

Anakin smiled. Clearly the boy was discombobulated. “It’s all over, Luke,” Anakin told him gently, putting a hand on his son’s shoulder. “The emperor is dead. We did it son. We did it together.”

Luke smiled as the sedative started to kick in once again, and he drifted off to sleep.

Anakin as though a tremendous weight had been removed from his chest. *He will live... he will be alright...* the relief rushed through him, rivaled only by the fierce love he bore his son.

Padmé watched the emotions flashing across Anakin’s face, growing more confused by the moment. How was it that at one moment he seemed so aloof and sullen, and the next he was brimming over with love and tenderness?

Anakin looked up, sensing his wife’s attention upon him. “I’m sorry this had to happen, Padmé,” he told her. “I know that doesn’t mean much, but I am sorry, so very sorry for everything.” He felt as though he could tell her he was sorry every day for a thousand lifetimes and it would still not be enough. He was unable to read her; unable to sense what she was feeling, though he was certain he knew. What he had done was unforgivable; his recent actions didn’t even begin to make up for the agony he had put her through.

Padmé nodded. “So what now, Anakin?” she asked. “Where do we go from here?”

Anakin frowned, not knowing how to respond. “I’m not sure what you mean,” he said slowly. *Surely she knows how I feel... how I wish things could be as they once were... how I wish I could take her into my arms right now and show her how I feel about her... but that will never happen, not after all that has happened.*

“I meant now that Palpatine is dead,” she lied. “What is going to happen?”

Anakin straightened up and folded his arms over his chest, shutting her out again. “The royal guard will seek out the assassin,” he told her. “Luke and I did not leave any living that saw us, so it will not be easy for them to track the deed to me.”

Padmé nodded her understanding, chilled by the thought of him killing everyone in his path. “I see,” she said. “What will this mean to the Empire, though? Now that Palpatine is

dead?”

“I don’t know,” Anakin replied. “I honestly don’t. The future wasn’t part of my considerations when I set out to destroy him.”

Padmé was about to respond when the medical droid interrupted her. “I’ll have to ask you to step aside,” it said. “I have the prosthesis ready.”

Anakin and Padmé stepped away from their son’s bedside, watching as the medical droid set to work.

“At least that hand *looks* real,” Anakin commented.

Padmé looked up at him, remembering how self-conscious he had been of his own prosthetic arm.

“Medical technology has come a long way,” she commented. “You are living proof of that.”

Anakin looked down at her. “Me?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied. ‘Your arm,’ she said, motioning to his right arm. “You’ve had it replaced.”

“Yes, I have,” he replied, beginning to wonder if she had any idea of the extent of the surgery he had undergone recently. Did she even know of the injuries he had incurred on Mustafar? Surely she must have; surely she knew that he had lived as Darth Vader for the past 22 years... how could she not?

“Where have you been, Padmé?” He asked at last, his own need to know superseding his efforts to maintain his distance. He turned and looked at her, and in his eyes she saw for the first time the lost little boy she had once known.

“Does it matter now?” she asked, looking back at Luke. “Palpatine managed to find me. Obviously my hiding spot wasn’t as secure as I thought.”

“What did he want with you? Why did he imprison you?” Anakin demanded, feeling anger rising within him again at the thought of his angel being in the hands of that monster.

“He wanted to know where Luke was,” Padmé replied. “He seemed to think that I would know. He told me that you and he were planning on turning him into a Sith,” she added, turning her eyes back to him.

“The emperor recognized the threat that my son posed to him,” Anakin replied, looking at Luke. “I merely suggested that rather than destroy the boy, we try to turn him into an ally.”

“Turning him into a Sith *is* destroying him,” Padmé retorted, turning her eyes back to him. “Letting that monster destroy him would have been far worse than death.”

Anakin turned and looked at his wife, seeing the anger and resentment in her eyes.

“I had no intention of letting Palpatine use Luke, Padmé,” he told her. “Luke is my son; I would do anything to protect him.”

“Would Darth Vader have done anything?” she countered. “Or would he have followed his master’s orders no matter what?”

Anakin sighed, his suspicions confirmed. She would never forgive him; never accept him, no matter what he did now.

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Leia into the medical ward. She stopped and looked at her parents, sensing that they were engrossed in an intense conversation.

“Everything alright?” she asked looking from one to the other.

“Fine,” Anakin said. “Luke will be fine. Were you able to make contact with Captain Solo?”

“Yes, he was back with the fleet. Thank you. Thank you for keeping your word,” Leia replied.

Anakin merely nodded in response. “I need to see what’s going on,” he added, anxious to put some distance between he and Padmé. “Excuse me.”

With that he left, leaving Padmé and Leia to watch his retreating figure.

“What was *that* all about?” Leia asked.

Padmé shook her head. “I’m not sure,” she replied softly. “I don’t begin to understand him, Leia. Sometimes he seems like the Anakin I once knew and loved... and then other times, he’s like a stranger to me.”

Leia sighed. “As much as I hate to admit it, he *has* changed, Mother,” she replied. “I knew him when he was Darth Vader; he was an unfeeling monster, bent on violence and destruction. Since finding Luke and I he has undergone a transformation, and I don’t mean just physically. Just the fact that he went through that life threatening surgery surprised me.”

“Life threatening surgery?” Padmé asked. “What are you talking about? He had his prosthetic arm replaced. How is that remotely life threatening?”

Leia looked at her mother in disbelief. “Mother, surely you know about the injuries he suffered,” she said. “He wore a breather suit for 22 years because of what happened to him.”

Padmé felt her blood run cold. She had seen holophotos of Darth Vader, and of course he was on the holonet often enough. She knew that Darth Vader had once been her Anakin, but she always assumed that the mask and armor were part of his persona, as Jango Fett’s had been part of his, a way to dehumanize himself. A way to hide his true identity from the galaxy; *what had happened to him on Mustafar*? The last thing she remembered on that awful day was the feel of his invisible fingers closing around her throat....

“I...I never knew that,” she admitted. “What happened to him, Leia? Do you know?”

Leia shook her head. “I know very little,” she replied. “All I know is the extent of the surgery. They had to replace most of his respiratory system, half of each leg, half of each arm, create new skin... he was badly injured. I don’t know how it happened, he’s never told me.”

Padmé realized just how little she knew about the ensuing years between when she had last seen Anakin and the recent days of their reunion. If there was ever a chance of reconnecting with him, she needed to learn all she could about what had happened. *That is, if he still wants me...*

Anakin returned to the bridge, his mind and heart a conflict of emotions. *How could I have been foolish enough to think that Padmé would forgive and forget? After everything I've done?*

"How is your son?"

Anakin shook himself from his reverie to give Piett his attention.

"He is going to be fine," Anakin told him. "His hand has been replaced, he will be just fine."

"What a relief," Piett replied. "Your wife must be very relieved to have you both back alive and well."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, she is. Any word from the surface?"

Piett shook his head. "No," he replied. "We broke out of orbit an hour ago and no sign of pursuit yet. Did anyone see you and Luke enter the palace?"

Anakin shook his head. "No one who is still alive," he replied. "We killed any one we encountered."

"Wise precaution," Piett replied. "So what now? What are you going to do now, Anakin? Remain with the Empire? Join your children in the Alliance?"

Anakin sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "I don't know," he replied. "I don't know where I belong anymore, Piett. I wish I knew what to do, I wish someone would just tell me."

"You know that's not possible," Piett replied. "This is your life, Anakin; it must be your decision. But think of it this way; you've been given a second chance, another opportunity to live the life you could have had with your family."

"Perhaps," Anakin answered. "Perhaps not. It's not so easy just to pick up the pieces, I'm learning that now."

Piett wanted to question him further, but realized that Anakin Skywalker was, despite his recent metamorphosis, still a private man.

"You need to get some sleep," Piett observed. "It's been a hell of a few days for you."

Anakin smiled. "It has indeed," he replied. "Thank you my friend. I don't know how I'd have gone through all this without your support."

"I am honored to be able to help you, Anakin," Piett replied. "You are a great man, don't ever doubt that."

"Thank you, Firmus," he replied. "Let me know if you hear anything from Coruscant," he added, heading for the exit.

"Of course," Piett replied. "Oh, and sir, where are we headed?"

Anakin turned around. "You're in command now, Piett," he said. "That's your decision." With that, he turned and left the bridge.

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Chapter 32

CHAPTER 32

Anakin returned to his quarters, his body aching with exhaustion and the exertion of the events of the past 24 hours. He wondered how the physicians of Kamino would approve of his reckless disregard for his still convalescing body. Yet, despite the fatigue and battle weariness he felt, Anakin *did* feel good. Really good. Better than he had in years. So much had happened since his surgery on Kamino that he'd had no time to reflect upon the miracle that the Kaminoan physicians had worked in his transformation.

As he stood in the 'fresher getting undressed, he stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. *Is that really me??* He thought to himself as he looked at the smooth, flawless skin that covered his chest. His arms were fully human again; *he* was fully human again. And his face... he noticed to his amazement that he needed a shave, and that the blond hair he had been born with was coming back, covering his head now with stubble. He stared into the blue eyes that were reflected back at him in the mirror, eyes that had not been seen by anyone save him in a lifetime. *My son's eyes...* the thought of his son brought a smile to Anakin's face. He was so proud of the boy, and felt such a strong connection with him it staggered him to think that they had spent only a few days together. It seemed like so much longer. *But Leia still rejects me....she will never accept me... nor will her mother...*

The thought of his wife soon erased the smile from his face. Seeing her again was like a dream come true, a thousand dreams that he'd spent the past 2 decades trying to sublimate. She was alive, but that was the only part of his dream that had any actual basis in reality. In his dreams, she would rush into his arms, absolving him from all his past transgressions, and vow her eternal devotion to him as she had so many years ago on Naboo. That was not going to happen, that much was certain. *And the sooner you accept that, the better...*

Anakin rubbed his eyes tiredly as he yawned, deciding to get to bed before he fell asleep right where he stood. He had just changed into his sleep pants when he heard the door chime.

"Piett, why can't you just make a damn decision yourself," he muttered as he headed for the door. He opened it, and was surprised to see Padmé standing there.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," she said, noticing that he appeared to be ready for bed.

Anakin shook his head. "Never," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"May I come in?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied, stepping back to let her enter. "I'm sorry; I'm just surprised to see you."

The awkward tension between them was obvious to both of them, and they stood for a moment in uncomfortable silence.

"Sit down," Anakin said. "Please."

Padmé looked around the austere quarters and sat down on the sole chair in the room. Anakin sat on the small desk nearby, watching her intently; curious to learn why she was here.

“I just found out something from Leia,” Padmé began. “Something very shocking, very disturbing, and I needed to talk to you about it.”

Anakin sighed, wondering which one of his atrocities his daughter had filled her in on. There were so many to choose from: her torture with the mind probe, the destruction of Alderaan, the killing of countless rebels... the list was a long one.

“What did she tell you?” he asked evenly, trying to keep his composure. Padmé was obviously very distressed by what she had learned, and looked up at Anakin with troubled eyes.

“She told me that...that you had been hurt, Anakin, very seriously hurt, and that was the reason you wore the black suit, the mask...” she said, trying to keep her voice calm. “Is it true??”

Anakin was so stunned by her question that he hesitated before responding. She didn’t know?? *So Kenobi... didn’t have the courage to tell her what you did to me, did you? How typical...*

“Yes it’s true,” Anakin replied, watching her closely for her reaction. “I nearly died on Mustafar, Padmé. I’m surprised you didn’t know that.”

Padmé’s eyes registered a brief flicker of pain at the mention of that dreadful planet; her memories of that day still too raw to examine closely. “How?” she asked. “What happened to you?”

Anakin frowned, not wishing to relive that horrific scene that changed his life irrevocably. His mind rushed, unheeded, back 22 years, to the shores of a river of fire, where his best friend and brother left him mutilated and in agony... he closed his eyes as the memory of fire engulfing him assaulted him...

He stood up and walked away from her, pushing the memories away, pushing her away with them. “Why do you want to know?” he asked.

“How can you ask me that?” she asked the pain in her voice unmistakable.

Anakin was surprised by the vehemence of her response. “I guess I just assumed you wouldn’t care, Padmé.”

Padmé stood up and walked over to him. “Would I be asking if I didn’t?” she replied.

Anakin looked down at her, confused by the contradicting emotions he sensed in her, so much like his own.

“Alright, I’ll tell you,” he said at last. ‘I... I fought with Obi-Wan,’ he began. “It was a brutal, prolonged fight that ended on the edge of a river of lava. I...I tried to jump to where he was, to gain the advantage of position, but as I was jumping, he...” Anakin stopped and turned away, not wanting her to see the pain these memories still inflicted him with.

“What did he do?” she asked, putting her hand on his arm. He looked down at her hand and then up at her face. She could see how difficult this was for him, how utterly agonizing the memories of that day were for him.

“He... he sliced through me, severing my legs, my arm... leaving me mutilated on the sand,” he continued, forcing each word out. “I was too close to the lava, and...the heat from it, from the sands.....ignited my clothing, engulfing me in flames.”

Padmé put her hands to her face, horrified that he had suffered such agony. “Oh, Anakin,” she whispered as her eyes filled with tears.

“He left me to die there, Padmé,” he continued. “He walked away and left me to burn. It was Palpatine who found me, took me back to Coruscant, and had me transformed into the thing that was known as Darth Vader.”

Padmé shook her head as the tears rolled down her face. “I had no idea you had suffered so,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

Anakin did not know how to respond. No one had ever expressed sorrow over his injuries; he himself had come to accept them as punishment for his betrayal of her. How was it that she was able to show genuine concern for him after all that he had done? After everything he had taken from her?

“Thank you, Padmé,” Anakin replied. “I... appreciate your compassion.”

Padmé sensed the conflict that raged through Anakin. She wanted to help him, to reach out to the Anakin she knew was still there inside of him, but was not certain he would respond to her. He seemed to be doing his best to push her away and shut her out, content to battle with his inner demons alone. *Just as he did before... when I lost him to Palpatine... when I lost him to the Dark Side.*

Anakin, why are you doing this? she thought sadly. Why are you pushing me away?

Anakin looked back at her, hearing her silent plea.

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” he asked.

Padmé was startled. “What did you say?”

“You think I’m pushing you away,” Anakin replied. “I heard the question in my mind as clearly as if you had asked it.”

“I’d forgotten about your ability to do that,” she said with a small smile.

“Old habits die hard,” he commented wryly.

“They do,” she agreed. She waited, wondering if he was going to answer the question, not wanting to ask it again, for it obviously had upset him the first time. But he did not answer, and Padmé believed that in itself was answer enough.

“I’m sure you must be tired,” she said at last. ‘I won’t keep you any longer,’ she said, putting distance between her and Anakin, sensing that he wanted it so. She walked to the door, hoping that he would stop her, that he would give her some reason to stay; but he did not. All she heard him say as she opened the door was, “Good night, Padmé.”

“Goodnight,” she replied without turning around. And then she was gone.

Anakin walked over to the door and rested his hand upon it. He hated the way he felt, hated the confusion and self doubt that assailed him. If only he could allow her in. She had always been able to assure him when he doubted himself, when all others did; why was it so difficult for him to let her do so now? *Because you are not the same man anymore, and the moment she realizes this she will reject you... she will leave you as you once left her...* he closed his eyes as his hands curled into fists of frustration over a situation he felt powerless to change.

Chapter 33

CHAPTER 33

Padmé returned to the medical ward where she found Leia sitting with her brother. Luke was awake, and seemed much more alert than he had earlier. Both of her children looked up as Padmé approached them.

“You look much better,” she commented, smiling at Luke.

Luke nodded, returning her smile. “I feel much better.” Luke watched his mother closely, sensing how distracted she was. “Is everything alright, Mother?” he asked her.

“Why do you ask, Luke?” she replied.

“You just seem... uneasy,” he commented. “You’ve spoken with Father, haven’t you?”

Padmé was surprised by her son’s ability to read her so well. *He was his father’s son...*

“Yes,” she said with a sigh. ‘I just came from seeing him,’ she admitted. “I’m worried about him,” she added quietly.

“Why?” asked Leia. “The emperor is dead; he got his revenge. He has all of us. Isn’t that what he wanted?”

Padmé looked at her daughter. “Leia, your father is a very complex man,” Padmé replied. “He has always been so. I get the impression that he is feeling very lost right now, very confused.”

Luke nodded. “I get that same impression,” he put in. “There are moments when I’m convinced he has renounced the Dark Side, but then I sense such tremendous anger in him, that I have to wonder if there is still a part of him that has not let go of it yet.”

“What are you saying, Luke?” Leia asked, growing alarmed. “That you think there is a chance he could slip? That he could become Darth Vader again??”

“No, of course not,” Luke replied. “But I sense that this is a dangerous time for him. He wants to be Anakin Skywalker, I know he does; but the anger is still there, the pain and fear that feeds the Dark Side.”

Padmé listened to her son in silence. She agreed with him, as much as she wanted to deny that she too had felt his conflict, she could not.

“Luke is right,” she said at last. “And it is up to us to make sure that he doesn’t slip back into the darkness. We have to assure him that he *is* Anakin Skywalker, that we believe in him. If he feels that he is alone, he will end up back in the darkness again.”

Leia listened to her mother and brother, her heart a jumble of mixed emotions. She wanted desperately to reach out to the man who had risked his life to save hers, the man who had shown Han mercy when he could have crushed him, the man who had avenged the wrong doings her family had been made to suffer. But if what Luke said was true, if there was even a

chance that the Dark Lord still lingered within the heart of her father....*no... I can never forget what he did to me... I will never forget that day, that horrible day... the images he put in my mind haunt me still... the terror I felt on that day still leaves me shaking and breathless in the night...*

Padmé looked at her daughter, seeing how conflicted she was. “Darth Vader did terrible things,” she said, knowing of the destruction of Alderaan. “I know that. We all know that. We all have the scars of his dark reign. But if we are to save him from slipping back into that black abyss, we have to put the past aside.”

“How can you, Mother?” Leia asked. “After everything he did to you?? How can you put it aside??”

“Because I could not bear to see him slip away from me again,” Padmé answered. ‘I lost him once; I can’t let that happen again. I love him, Leia. I know you must think me mad for feeling that way, but I have always loved him...’ “she stopped as her own emotions and insecurities beset her. She pushed them aside and looked back up at her daughter.” Besides, you seem to forget that he risked his life to save me, Leia; to save all three of us. I don’t expect you to fully understand, Leia,’ she began. “But you see, I know Anakin Skywalker, better than anyone, and I know that he is worth fighting for. I am not saying that the past can just be forgotten; I know we all bear the scars of it. But if this family is ever to stand a chance of becoming whole, we have to get past it, no matter how difficult it might be.”

Leia shook her head. “I don’t know if I can do that,” she said. “Darth Vader destroyed my home, killed the people who raised me as well as millions of other innocent people; how can I get past that?”

“We will help you, Leia,” Luke said at last, taking his sister’s hand. “We are your family; that’s what families do.”

Padmé smiled. “Luke is right,” she said. “We all have to help one another, and most especially, your father. He needs all of us to bring him back. He’s almost there; but without our support, he won’t make it.”

Leia knew that her mother and brother were right. Part of her wanted more than anything to have a family, to acknowledge and embrace the connection she felt with her father.

“I will try,” Leia said at last. “But I can’t make any promises. That’s the best I can do.”

Padmé and Luke exchanged a look and smiled. Both of them sensed that it would fall to them to bring this family together, for Leia and Anakin were so alike in their stubbornness that it would be difficult to get them to bend at all. The fact that Leia was willing to try meant a great deal, and Luke and Padmé knew this. At least it was a start.

Chapter 34

CHAPTER 34

Leia had tried for close to three hours to sleep, but it was futile. She could not get the conversation she'd had with her mother and brother earlier out of her mind.

It astounded her that her mother still loved her father, after all that he had put her through. *How is that possible? How can she bear to look at him after the hell he'd put her through?* Yet, Leia knew what it was like to love someone; after all, didn't she love Han Solo despite all his shortcomings? All his arrogance and pig-headedness? Leia smiled as she thought of him, missing him desperately. He might not be alive now were it for her father. Han had been as surprised as Leia when Darth Vader had arranged for his bounty to be paid. Luke had accepted their father completely; the bond between them was profound and undeniable. Deep inside Leia too wished for that sort of bond with her father, for as much as she had tried to deny it, there was a connection between them. She had felt it, strong and undeniable. *But how do I get past it all? How do I forgive the unforgivable?*

Leia got out of bed and got dressed. Before changing her mind, she left her quarters and set out.

Leia wasn't the only one who could not sleep. Despite having fallen into a deep sleep, Anakin awoke several hours later and was unable to return to it. He had been dreaming of his wife, of their honeymoon on Naboo, when all that mattered was their love and being together. He had dreamed of Padmé often over the past 22 years, his subconscious mind not able to repress the memories that his conscious mind refused to acknowledge.

He tossed and turned for an hour or so, and then decided to get up. He hadn't been up long when he sensed the presence of someone standing at his door. It was one of his children. He could sense their ambivalence, their doubt as they stood there trying to decide whether or not to press the door chime. Anakin decided to make the decision for them, and walked over to the door.

Leia was startled when the door slid open to reveal her father. He did not seem surprised to see her. *Probably knew I was here...* she reasoned.

"I'm sorry to be here so late," Leia began, uneasy under her father's appraising eyes. "I...I couldn't sleep."

"No, me neither," Anakin admitted. "Come on in."

Leia walked into her father's quarters and looked around at the unmade bed. It looked as though her father had spent as restless a night as she had.

"What's on your mind?" Anakin asked his daughter.

Leia turned and looked at him. "Plenty," she admitted. "Too much actually, that's why I can't sleep. I've always had trouble sleeping, actually; can't seem to turn off my mind at night."

Anakin nodded a slight smile on his face. "Yes, I can relate," he said. "I'm afraid you come by that trait honestly, Leia."

Leia smirked. "Thanks," she said.

"No problem," Anakin replied with a smile. "Have a seat."

Leia sat down on the chair her father indicated and folded her hands on her lap. "I had a conversation with Mother earlier," she began.

"I guess she was here earlier tonight, was she?"

Anakin nodded, curious to see what his daughter had to say.

"She's worried about you, you know," Leia continued.

Anakin frowned. "Why?" he asked simply.

"She seems to think that you are in danger of slipping back to the Dark Side," Leia said, watching her father closely for his reaction.

"She does?" Anakin replied, standing up and walking away from her.

"Is she right?" Leia asked.

Anakin looked back at his daughter, unnerved by her candor. *She is her father's daughter...*

"I have renounced the Dark Side, Leia," he replied.

"Have you?" Leia asked.

Anakin frowned. "How can you ask me that?" he retorted.

"Because you are still so angry," she returned. "You are still shutting out everyone."

Am I doing that? he asked himself.

Anakin looked away from her, not liking the way she was cutting through his defenses. *Padmé was always able to do that too...*

"Is that what I'm doing?" he asked tiredly.

"My mother seems to think so," Leia replied. "And she knows you better than anyone. I thought you said you loved her."

Anakin turned around. "You have no idea how much I love her!" he replied hotly. "Don't you dare question that!"

Leia lifted her eyebrows, surprised by his outburst. "Then show her you do," she replied, not letting his outburst intimidate her. "Let her in. Don't keep pushing her away, because I strongly suspect that's what you've been doing."

Anakin was about to respond when Leia continued, cutting him off.

"Do you know how lucky you are that she is even willing to be in the same room as you after everything you did?" she said, growing angry as well. "You destroyed her life! And yet she still loves you. She is willing to put the past aside to try and reach out to you."

"How do you know that?" Anakin retorted. "What makes you think she would do such a thing?"

"Because she told me so," Leia replied, standing toe to toe with her father. "I you weren't so damn stubborn and brooding you would realize that!!"

Anakin stared down at his daughter, at a total loss for words.

"Why does any of this matter to you?" he asked at last. "You've made your feelings for me quite clear. I would think that you would be doing your utmost to keep us apart."

Her father's question took her by surprise, and she didn't know how to respond to it. *He's right... why do I care? I don't know why... I just do.*

"I...I don't know why," she replied at last. "Maybe it's because I love my brother, and I know nothing would make him happier. Maybe I want my mother to finally have some happiness in her life... maybe I'm trying to accept that you are my father."

Leia's words surprised Anakin, and he softened. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I... I know how difficult this is for you. I have caused you a great deal of pain, I know that, and if I could take it all back, I'd do so in a heartbeat. I suppose that's why I have such a hard time believing that your mother is willing to give me a second chance... she more than anyone has reason to hate me, to reject me."

"I know," admitted Leia. "But she loves you. Despite everything, she loves you still. I don't begin to understand the depth of that sort of love, but it's obviously there, even after all these years, after all the pain you caused her."

Anakin considered his daughter's words, still reluctant to believe them. "I want to believe that, Leia," he said quietly, "More than anything. I'm just afraid to."

Leia was surprised by her father's admission. *Since when is Darth Vader afraid of anything?*

"What are you afraid of?" Leia asked.

"I...I don't know," he said, turning away from her.

"I think you do," Leia retorted. "But until you figure it out for yourself, no one can tell you what to do. As much as we'd like to try," she added with a wry smile.

Anakin looked back at her. He knew what an effort it must have been for her to come here like this, to reach out to him the way he had. It made him think that perhaps there was hope after all of having his family back.

"Thank you, Leia," he said. "I know it wasn't easy for you to come here tonight. It means a great deal to me that you did so."

She smiled. "I didn't know if I'd have the guts to go through with it, to be honest. I stood outside your door trying to work up the nerve to ring the buzzer."

"I know," Anakin replied with a smile. "I felt your presence."

"Figures," Leia replied. She sighed. "Well, maybe we should both try to get some sleep."

Anakin nodded. “Agreed,” he said. “Sleep well, Leia.”

“You too,” Leia replied.

Anakin watched her as she turned and left him then, amazed and encouraged by her visit. *Padmé loves me...* he still couldn’t believe it. But if Leia was right, then he needed to make sure he let her know how he felt before she gave up on him completely.

Chapter 35

CHAPTER 35

Anakin paced up and down in his quarters, his mind mulling over the unexpected visit he'd just had with his daughter. Ever since he had come to realize that she was his child, that horrible night on board the Death Star had haunted him. He had been so obsessed with finding the stolen plans that he stopped just short of killing her to find the information, and she had not given it to him. *Now I know why I could not break her.* Yet he had tried to break her, with torture devices, with mind control, by planting suggestions in her mind so horrific they would have driven a weaker person mad... She more than anyone had reason to hate him; and yet it was she who had taken the initiative to reach out to him.

Not only that, she had revealed an incredible truth to him, a truth Anakin still had trouble believing. Her words still echoed in his mind:

Despite everything, she loves you still. I don't begin to understand the depth of that sort of love, but it's obviously there, even after all these years, after all the pain you caused her.

How can that be? Anakin couldn't wrap his mind around it; it didn't make any sense to him... *I'm not worthy of your compassion, Padmé, and certainly not worthy of your love.... I don't even know who I am anymore. I don't want to pull you down in this; you don't deserve that, not after everything I've put you through. I don't want to hurt you again, Padmé.* Yet, from what Leia had said, he was hurting her, hurting her by refusing to let her close, by pretending that he didn't care anymore. *But what if Leia is wrong? What if she is misleading me?* No, she would not do that, she would not toy with my emotions, and certainly not those of her mother... *so what do I do now? Do I tell Padmé how I feel? Do I take that chance?*

Anakin's ruminations were interrupted by a signal from the bridge.

"What is it?" Anakin asked.

"Sir, we've dropped out of light speed and are awaiting orders," Piett's voice reported.

"I'll be right there," Anakin replied. The last thing he wanted right now was the burden of command. At one time the thought of having control of the Empire in his grasp was his sole focus, his sole reason for living. Now that had all changed. Now he realized that there were more important things in life than power; the love, acceptance and forgiveness of his family were all he craved now. *Life was indeed ironic* he mused as he rode the lift to the bridge.

"What is our status?" Anakin asked as he met Piett on the bridge.

"We have left Coruscant," Piett replied, "and are on the outer periphery of the system."

Anakin nodded. "And what are your plans?"

Piett smiled. "My plans? Well, to be honest, sir, I was hoping you had some. We are in an unprecedented situation; the emperor is dead, Darth Vader is dead. Where does that leave the Empire?"

"In your hands," Anakin replied. "You are the admiral of the flagship of the fleet. Who better than you to assume leadership of the Empire?"

Piett did not seem convinced. "Me? I'm not a politician, Anakin, no more than you are."

Anakin smiled. "The way I see it, you are the best choice, and certainly the best chance for peace in the galaxy."

"Peace? Now there's a thought," Piett replied thoughtfully.

"If you were in control of the Empire, you could make it happen, Piett," Anakin pointed out. "You have two of the leaders of the Alliance on the ship right now, they could arrange for a meeting with the rest. Why not consider it?"

"Why don't you take a hand in this?" Piett asked. "It's your idea, your vision, Anakin."

Anakin sighed. "I have other considerations now, Piett," he replied. "My own life needs to be sorted out before I can take on sorting out the galaxy."

Piett nodded in understanding. "Yes, I can understand that. Still, the galaxy needs heroes right now, Anakin."

"I hardly qualify as a hero, not anymore," Anakin replied introspectively. "Not after all the atrocities I've had a hand in over the past 20 years."

Piett listened patiently. "I can see how you would feel that way," he replied. "But the past cannot be undone, Anakin, and there is no sense in spending the rest of your life punishing yourself."

Anakin shook his head. "It's not so easy," he said, turning his gaze to the stars that filled the large view screen. "I have so much to atone for, so much damage to fix; I don't even know where to begin, or if it's even possible to make up for all that I've done."

Piett watched Anakin, knowing how confused he was. Yet, he also knew that Anakin Skywalker was a complex man, one whose passions ran deep. At one time, he had been consumed with power; as Darth Vader that was his focus, his obsession. That focus had shifted completely.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?" Piett said at last.

"Please do," Anakin said, turning to him once again.

"Concentrate on your family," Piett replied. "Let them be your focus right now. I have a feeling that if you set things right with them, the rest will all fall into place."

Anakin nodded. "And what of the Empire?"

Piett shrugged. "You know what the bureaucratic process is like," he replied. "It will take weeks before the dust settles after all the upheaval lately. Not to mention the investigation into the death of the emperor."

Anakin frowned. "Yes, I'd almost forgotten about that," he muttered. "I imagine I will be called to account for that eventually."

"Perhaps," Piett replied. "Perhaps the security holograms of the day he died mysteriously disappeared," he suggested cryptically.

Anakin looked at his first officer with surprise. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"I think you know," Piett replied. "You don't think I rose to the rank of admiral without knowing a few tricks, do you?"

Anakin laughed. "I know exactly how you rose to the rank of admiral, Firmus," he replied. "I always figured you were the only man under my command with a brain in his head."

"Thanks... I think," Piett replied wryly. "Now go talk to your family, and I will figure out what to do to keep this crew busy while we decide upon our course of action."

"Sounds like a good plan," Anakin replied. "Thank you, Firmus. Again, I am in your debt."

Anakin left the bridge and headed for the lift. He could feel his pulse racing, and actually began to perspire as he approached the deck where his wife's quarters were. He was reminded of a day long ago, of another ride in a lift, when he was a 19 year old Padawan who had just been assigned, along with his master, to protect a certain Senator from Naboo. She still had that affect on him, even after all these years. *Be calm, Skywalker... relax...*

The lift reached its destination, and Anakin stepped out. He strode down the corridor, each step causing his heart to beat a little faster. *This is ridiculous*, he admonished himself. *I'm not a 19 year old boy, damn it! I'm...* his thoughts were derailed when he saw Padmé standing in the corridor before him. She seemed surprised to see him.

"Hello Anakin," she said. He could sense her hesitate, and realized that she was doing her best to protect herself from his indifference.

"Hello," he replied. "I... I was just coming to see you."

She lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "Oh?" she asked. "Why is that?"

"I was hoping we could talk," he replied, hating the tension that was between them. "We need to talk, Padmé."

She studied his face, trying to read what was in his eyes. There was a time when she could tell what was on his mind simply by the set of his shoulders, the set of his jaw; but not now. Now he was an enigma to her, and until he decided to lower the defenses he had meticulously built up over the past 2 decades, she would never know what was in his heart. Unless of course he told her; *which isn't likely to happen*, she told herself.

"By all means," she said. "My quarters are just down the corridor."

"After you," he said.

They walked along in silence, each trying to read the other, each failing to do so. He was not the only one to have erected walls.

"So what is on your mind?" she asked casually as the door closed behind them. She sat down on the edge of her bed and watched him, waiting for him to begin, wondering what it was he wanted to say.

"I... I don't know where to start," he admitted, pacing nervously in the small room. "There is so much I want to say, so much I need to say, I don't even know how to begin."

Padmé did not respond, and merely watched him as he paced around.

“First of all, I want to say that I’m sorry,” he began. ‘No, that’s too weak,’ he added. “Sorry just doesn’t cut it. There are no words that I can say to express my shame at what I did to you, Padmé. The level of shame is beyond description, the depth of my regret is immeasurable. I... I don’t expect you to forgive what I did, nor do I deserve forgiveness; but I wanted to say it to you nonetheless.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Is there anything else?” she prodded, knowing full well that there was. She knew him well enough even after all these years to know that much.

Anakin looked at his wife, trying to decide what to do, what to say next.

“I... I think that’s all,” he began, turning away from her. “I’m sorry if I’ve upset you by bringing all this up, but I...”

“Why are you doing this?” she interrupted, standing up, unable to take the agonizing tension any longer.

Her sudden vehemence startled him. “What is it that I am doing?” he asked, not looking at her, knowing that she would be able to read his eyes too well.

“You know exactly what,” she retorted, taking his arm and turning him to face her. “You’re doing your best to pretend that you’re alright, but I know otherwise. Why won’t you talk to me?”

Anakin faced his wife, confused by her actions, by her insistence.

“I...I don’t know,” he admitted at last, weakening under her discerning eyes. “I’m not sure... I’m not sure of anything anymore, Padmé. All I know is that I destroyed our family, committed such unspeakable acts... I don’t know how you can even bear to look at me anymore.”

“Listen to me, Anakin,” she said, moving to face him again. She waited until he met her gaze before continuing. “I’m not going to pretend that the past never happened, there’s no way either of us can do that. I’m not going to stand here and tell you that I can forgive and forget all that happened, that would be a lie and you know it. But what I can tell you is we have to talk about it, we can’t just ignore what happened; we must talk about it if there is ever to be healing in our family.”

Anakin looked at his wife, not sure he had heard her correctly. It almost sounded as though she wanted a future with him. But that couldn’t be.

“No, we cannot ignore the past,” Anakin replied at last. “But neither can we change it. Believe me, I would give anything to change it, to undo all the pain I caused you; but I can’t. I have to live with that shame and guilt for the rest of my life.”

Padmé saw in his eyes the depth of his pain, and she finally realized why he was so reluctant to reach out to her. His transformation from Vader back to Skywalker was so swift, so unexpected, that he had not yet had time to adjust. Anakin Skywalker was horrified by the atrocities committed by Darth Vader; and was forced to carry the burden of guilt for those actions. He was overwhelmed with shame with remorse, and hated himself for the life he had lead as Darth Vader.

“Anakin,” she said, taking his hands. “Look at me.”

“I am looking at you, Padmé,” he replied.

“No, *really* look at me,” she insisted, “like you used to. Look inside me, Anakin. You were always able to see what was in my mind and in my heart. What do you see there now?”

Anakin stared at her, trying to look beyond the confines of his own self made purgatory, beyond the guilt and the shame of his past, beyond the remorse he felt every time he thought of what he had done to her. And what he saw astounded him. *She loves me...*

“Padmé,” he said his voice no more than a whisper.

She took his face in her hands, realizing that he needed to hear her say it. “I love you, Ani,” she said softly. “I have always loved you. Can’t you see that?”

He looked down at her hands in his, and could only nod, his throat too constricted to speak. Hot tears spilled down his face. His catharsis had begun.

Wordlessly she wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled him to her, cradling him in her arms as he wept.

“Let it all out, Ani,” she soothed, stroking the top of his head as he buried his face against her shoulder. “You don’t have to go through this alone. I’m here now. We will get through this together.”

“I love you,” he said at last, pulling back and taking her face in his hands. “I have never stopped loving you, Padmé. All the years when I thought you were dead, a part of me was dead too. You are in my very soul, Padmé. I... I don’t know how I existed without you.”

Padme smiled; elated and relieved to see the Anakin she once knew and loved at last.

“I don’t want to lose you to the Dark Side again, Anakin,” she said, looking up at him. “I know you are going through an identity crisis of sorts right now; but I want you to know that your family is ready to help you through it. We won’t let you fall again, Ani. I won’t let you fall.”

Anakin smiled. “I don’t know if I deserve your love, Padme; I don’t know that I deserve a second chance. But I am grateful beyond words for both.”

“I am grateful to have my Anakin back,” Padme replied softly. “I have been lost without him.”

Chapter 36

CHAPTER 36

"How are you feeling?"

Luke looked up to see his sister standing in the doorway.

"Bored," Luke replied. "I wish they'd let me out of here."

Leia smiled. "Aren't Jedi supposed to be patient?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," Luke admitted with a grin. "I guess I'm not quite a Jedi yet after all."

"Yes you are," Leia replied. "You've more than convinced me at least."

"Thanks," Luke said, a little embarrassed by her overt praise. 'So what's new with Han?' he asked, changing the subject. "Did you...I mean, what did you tell him?"

Leia shrugged. "Not that much," she replied. "I told him that we were fine, that we had found our parents, and that Darth Vader and the emperor were dead."

Luke's eyes widened. "Not much??" he said. "Put into those terms, it sounds like a whole lot."

"I guess it is," Leia replied. "I'm still trying to get a grip on all the changes, Luke. It's been so much in such a little time. I'm still trying to assimilate it all."

Luke smiled at her. "I think you're doing great," he told her. "You've come a long way towards accepting our father, haven't you?"

Leia looked uncomfortable. "I don't know," she said. "It's still very hard to look at him without thinking of whom he was only a short time ago, Luke. He did horrible things to me, things that I still have nightmares about. You don't get over that overnight."

"Of course not," Luke conceded. "And I'm sure he doesn't expect that. But remember that it was Darth Vader who did those things, not Anakin Skywalker."

"But they are the same person, Luke," Leia retorted. "I know you don't see it that way, but the reality is they are two sides of the same coin. He realizes that himself, Luke. He said himself that he knows how much pain he has caused me," she finished quietly.

Luke watched his sister closely, sensing in her a new level of acceptance in her relationship with their father. "You've spoken to him, haven't you?" Luke asked.

Leia looked up. It still startled her that both Luke and their father had the uncanny and unnerving ability to read her emotions and even her very thoughts. "Yes," she replied at last. "I spoke with him last night. I couldn't sleep; I figured one of us needed to take the first step."

Luke smiled. "I'm so proud of you, Leia," he said. "I know that couldn't have been easy for you."

Leia shook her head. “No, it wasn’t,” she admitted. “Not at first, anyway. Once we started talking, well, it just felt... right. I don’t know how to explain, it; I certainly never expected that I could talk to him that way.”

“You felt the connection, Leia,” Luke told her. “The same connection you share with me, you also share with him. The Force is strong with all three of us; it is what enables us to know what the other is feeling.”

Leia nodded. “I don’t begin to understand how all that works,” she stated. “But I know what you mean. Anyway, the main reason I wanted to ask to him was because of Mother. I thought he needed a little push in her direction. I can’t believe she still loves him, but she does; and it was hurting her that he was distancing himself from her.”

“Do you think it did any good?” Luke asked.

Leia shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “Mother was right; he’s very confused. I know he loves her, but I think he’s afraid that she will reject him if he tries to reach out to her. It’s a very awkward situation.”

Luke sighed. “Well, you’ve done all that can be done, Leia,” he replied. “It’s up to the two of them now.”

“I suppose,” she replied. “Still, I’m worried about her. Let’s go see how she is. I’m sure it would be okay for you to leave here, even if it’s just for a little while. Just use one of your Jedi mind tricks on the medical droid.”

Luke laughed as he got off the bed. “They don’t work on droids,” he told her. “Let’s go.”

Luke and Leia proceeded to their mother’s quarters and stopped at the door. From inside they could hear what sounded like their father’s voice, or rather, incoherent noises that resembled his voice.

The twins looked at one another, startled and confused. “What the...” Luke started, and then stopped. “Oh boy,” he said, his face turning red. “Let’s get out of here,” Leia said, grabbing her brother’s hand and turning to go. But the door opened at that moment and their mother stood before them.

“Hello you two,” she smiled. “What a lovely surprise. Come on in.”

Luke and Leia exchanged a quick glance, and then walked in. Their father was sitting on a chair, looking over at them. “Good morning,” he said. “Nice to see you up and about, son.”

“Thanks,” Luke replied. “It’s nice to be out of that medical ward. I...I hope we’re not interrupting something,” he added, looking from his father back to his mother.

Padmé frowned. “Why would you think that?” she asked.

Luke and Leia looked at each other uneasily. “No reason,” he lied.

“Your mother was just giving me one of her incredible shoulder massages,” Anakin told them.

So that’s what we heard... Luke realized with great relief.

“You’re tied up in knots,” Padmé said, standing behind her husband again and resuming her ministrations.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh...” Anakin said, closing his eyes. “I’d almost forgotten how well you do that,” he said with a smile.

Luke and Leia exchanged a look and suppressed a laugh.

“So what’s on your minds?” Anakin asked his children.

“We wanted to make sure that everything was okay with you two,” Leia replied. “I guess they are,” she added with a smile.

“Checking up on us, is that it?” Padmé asked with a smile.

“Well, not exactly,” Luke replied defensively.

“It’s okay, Luke,” Padmé replied. “We had a talk, and even though we all have a long way to go, I think we’re on the right track. Isn’t that right, Anakin?”

Anakin made no response, as he dozed off.

“Ani?” she said, looking around at him, and then smiled seeing his sleeping face.

“Works every time,” she said, looking up at her children. “He hasn’t slept in days.”

“Under ordinary circumstances he’d still be in the hospital,” Luke pointed out. ‘But circumstances are anything but ordinary.’

“The story of our lives,” Padmé sighed, sitting down with her children. “We have never had an ordinary life, your father and I.”

“None of us have had an ordinary life,” Leia spoke up. “Luke and I have spent our lives living in fear of the Empire, the empire our father helped create.”

Padmé looked at her daughter, stung by her words. “Is that all you see when you look at him, Leia?” she asked. “The puppet of the emperor?”

“It’s hard not to remember all that he did as Darth Vader, Mother,” Leia replied tersely.

“No, I’m sure it isn’t,” Padmé replied. ‘But you are not the only one in this room who suffered because of Darth Vader, Leia,’ she reminded her. “You’d be wise to remember that.”

Leia made no reply, and Luke could feel the tension between his mother and sister. “Father was a war hero, wasn’t he Mother?” he asked, trying to break the tension.

Padmé looked at her son. “Yes Luke, he was,” she replied. “The Hero without Fear is what they called him during the Clone Wars.”

“I wonder how many people know that Darth Vader was once the Hero Without Fear,” Luke mused. Luke nodded. “Do we tell anyone of his former identity? I think if the rebel Alliance knows that he was once Darth Vader they will want to prosecute him.”

“They would,” Leia said. “Can you blame them? Darth Vader spent two decades persecuting the Alliance.”

“No, we can’t blame them,” Padmé replied. “But if he is given over to be prosecuted, he will surely slip away from us again.”

“Mother is right,” Luke said. “I agree that Darth Vader deserves to be punished for what he did; but Darth Vader is dead. Don’t you see, Leia? If Father is brought to trial, he will never know full redemption, and we will never stand a chance of being a family.”

Leia frowned, torn by her sense of justice and her desperate need to have a family. How could she let Darth Vader go unpunished for all the evil deeds he had perpetrated over the years? The ghosts of all the millions of slain innocents cried out for justice; how could she ignore them?

“I don’t know, Luke,” she said at last, a frown creasing her brow. “I will need to think about this. I know he has changed, but we’re not talking about a few misdemeanors; we’re talking about mass murder, genocide; how can we let that go unpunished?”

“I want you to see something, Leia,” Padmé said at last. “Before you pass judgment on your father.” She walked over to the computer console and typed in a name, and then waited. When what she wanted came up, she pointed to the computer screen, indicating for Leia to come over and see what was on it. Leia reluctantly complied.

“This is the military record of Anakin Skywalker, your father,” Padmé told her. “Read this, and then tell me if the decision to damn him for the crimes committed by Darth Vader seems right to you.”

Leia walked over to the computer screen. She looked at the holo of her father, so young, so handsome and dashing in his Jedi robes. She looked up at her mother.

“Read it,” Padmé said again.

Leia sighed, and sat down at the console to read.

Padmé watched her, and then went and sat with her son.

“Do you think this will convince her?” he asked her quietly.

Padmé shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she replied. “But it’s always a good idea to know both sides of a story before you judge someone.”

“How can you be so forgiving?” he asked her. “After all you’ve been through?”

Padmé looked at her son. “How can you, Luke?”

Her question startled him, and he didn’t quite know how to respond. *How was it he had been able to accept his after, knowing who he had been for so many years?*

“I suppose I’m just desperate to know my real father,” he said at last.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I know you must be,” she replied. “And I hope before long you will meet him. He’s in there, Luke,” she added, looking back at Anakin who was still sleeping on the chair she’d left him in. “I know he is. I’m sure you’ve seen glimpses of him already, just as I have.”

Luke nodded, remembering the smile his father had given him when he had seen him alive in the emperor’s palace back on Coruscant; of the patient manner in which he showed Luke

how to construct a lightsaber, and the fierce protectiveness he'd shown when Leia was in trouble. *That* was Anakin Skywalker; of that there was no doubt in Luke's mind.

"Yes," Luke agreed. "More than a few. But unless Leia can see them too, our family will forever be divided."

Padmé nodded in agreement, a lump forming in her throat. *No, don't let my family be torn apart again just as we have found one another... haven't we suffered enough already? Haven't we all paid the price for his fall?*

"We just have to pray that she can see what we see, Luke," Padmé said, taking her son's hand. "And that she sees it before it's too late."

Chapter 37

CHAPTER 37

Anakin awoke with a start, surprised that he had even been asleep. The last thing he remembered was his wife's hands working the tension knots out of his shoulders, and his children...

He looked around the room and saw that only Leia was still there, studying intently the content on the view screen before her. He stood up and stretched.

"What's that you're reading?" he asked.

Leia started, not expecting to hear her father's voice. She turned around to see him walking towards her.

"Uh, just looking up some data on..." she replied, not sure she wanted him to see what she was looking at.

"On me," Anakin, said, peering at the screen. "Look at all that hair," he mused, running his hand over his still stubbly scalp.

Leia couldn't help but crack a small smile. "It will come back," she said. "It already is."

"Yeah, I know," he replied, sitting down next to her. "Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked, watching his daughter closely for her reaction.

"I'm not sure," she replied, looking back at the screen where her father's youthful image looked back at her. "You're so young... how old are you here?"

Anakin leaned forward for a closer look. "Twenty-one," he replied. "Remind you of anyone?"

Leia nodded. "Yes, Luke looks quite a bit like you," she remarked. "Not as big as you though; and not as intense."

Anakin sighed as he nodded thoughtfully. "No, he's more like his mother in many respects," he replied.

Leia looked at him. "What about me?" she asked. "Who am I like?"

Anakin regarded his daughter for a moment before responding; knowing that the last thing she wanted to hear was probably the most accurate. "Well, you look like your mother," he replied at last. "But I'm afraid you are more like me in personality. You probably don't want to hear that, but you did ask," he concluded with a wry smile.

"I did," she conceded. "And I have to admit that I do see myself in you. At least, the you that is sitting here before me. Not the man you were 6 months ago."

Anakin frowned. "No, that was no man, Leia," he replied solemnly. "That was a monster." He rubbed his eyes tiredly as he fought to push away the images of his daughter in agony

from his mind. *So many senseless acts of cruelty... so much blood...*

"He was," Leia agreed. "But he's gone now, right?"

Anakin looked at his daughter. "You have your doubts?" he asked.

Leia shrugged. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "Part of me does, part of me is still afraid that Darth Vader is still lurking somewhere inside of you. I'm sorry, but that's the truth."

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he replied. "I did. And I can understand your doubts, Leia. You have a long history with Vader. I am doing my best to destroy the traces of him, but it isn't easy."

"No, obviously not," Leia agreed. "Would you... if you could go back and change things, would you? I mean, what would you have done differently?"

Anakin considered his daughter's question for a moment before answering. "That's a difficult question," he replied at last. "I'm not sure I could narrow down one decision that I made that determined the course of my life; it was more a matter of a series of events that lead me to the Dark Side."

"But where did it all begin?" Leia persisted. "Surely there was a point where you had a difficult decision to make, and you chose the one that lead you to the Dark Side."

Yes...there was a decision... a dreadful, terribly wrong decision...

Anakin frowned as he remembered that day in Palpatine's office so long ago. Master Windu had the Dark Lord at his mercy, and would have killed him if Anakin hadn't interfered. *But he had... he had struck down the Jedi Master, allowing the monstrous Palpatine to live... and that was the beginning of his apprenticeship, the beginning of the end..*

"There was one moment," Anakin said at last, standing up and walking away from his daughter. "One terrible, monstrously wrong decision," he said.

"What happened?" Leia asked.

Anakin hesitated before answering her. "I... defended a man, a man whom I'd known for many years, a man I trusted, and in doing so, I struck down a fellow Jedi. I knew that the man I was defending was a Sith... I knew that but I didn't care, all I cared about was the power that he promised, the power to..."

"So it was about power," Leia interjected, her eyes hardening once again. "You threw away your life with mother for power, is that what you're telling me?"

"It wasn't that simple," Anakin replied. "If you'll only let me explain..."

"What is there to explain?" Leia cut in again. 'I was a fool to think that there was more to your fall to the Dark Side,' she added, shaking her head ruefully. "It seems that Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker are not so different after all."

Anakin was stung by her words, not even knowing how to respond. *Her mind is closed to me... she will never accept me, never give me the chance to explain what happened...*

The door opened at that moment, and both father and daughter turned to see Luke and Padmé enter the room. Leia stood up at once and walked away from him.

"Did you have a bit of sleep?" Padmé asked, setting down a tray of breakfast on the table.

"A bit, yes," Anakin replied, trying to hide the despair he felt. "Is that for me?" he asked hopefully.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, it's for you," she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Luke has brought some for you too, Leia."

"Thanks," she replied.

Luke looked at his sister and sensed her conflicted emotions. He hoped that she had begun to soften towards their father; yet there were still many scars that he knew would take a long time to heal. Perhaps they never would.

"We saw Admiral Piett in the mess, Father," Luke said. "He asked if he could speak with us. I told him to meet us here. I hope that's okay."

Anakin nodded as he dug into his breakfast. "I know exactly what he's going to say," he said between bites.

"Oh?" Padmé asked. "Jedi intuition?"

"No," Anakin replied. "I just know him like the back of my hand," he replied.

Padmé laughed along with Luke. "Well, we'll see soon enough."

Anakin nodded as he looked over at his daughter who had barely touched her food. She looked up and met his eyes. He could see in their dark depths the pain and disappointment that he himself felt. *Won't you even let me in, Leia?* He thought. *If you never let me close, you will never know the truth.*

"I'm not hungry," Leia said suddenly, standing up. She did not like the way her father was getting into her head, and decided to put an end to it. "Thanks for the breakfast Luke."

Anakin watched her leave, and then proceeded to eat his own breakfast.

An hour later...

"Let me get this straight," Anakin said, folding his arms over his chest, looking at his family as Piett stood by watching with amusement.

"You think I should reveal that I was Darth Vader? After the lengths I've gone to in order to hide my identity?" he asked, frowning. "What sense does that make?"

"Listen to me, Anakin," Padmé replied patiently. "As Darth Vader you can assume control of the Empire, declare yourself emperor. As the emperor's right hand you would naturally be his successor."

"Your wife is right," Piett put in. "You know as well I do that were I to make a bid for the leadership, grand moffs would come out of the woodwork from all over the galaxy to challenge me. It would be chaos. You are the natural choice to succeed the emperor."

Anakin was not convinced. "You all seem to forget that I have renounced the Dark Side," he reminded them. "And you are asking me to become Darth Vader again?"

"Not become him," Luke said. "Just assume the name. No one needs to know that you are really Anakin Skywalker again; Vader is just a name, Father."

"Luke is right," Padmé said. "As emperor you could put an end to all the injustices in the galaxy that the Empire has created. Plus you could negotiate with the Alliance for a truce to end the war."

Anakin listened to his wife's words. *Could it work? Could he really fix all the damage that he'd had a hand in? But the danger of that much power was daunting... how could he avoid the dark side with that much power in his grasp?*

"I don't know," he said at last, shaking his head and walking across the room. "That much power... I'm not sure I am ready to do this."

"No one here doubts that you have renounced the Dark Side completely, Father," Luke said. "And that you can do this. I know it is a huge job, but you would have the support of all of us behind you. Mother is an experienced politician; her help would be invaluable. You're the only chance the galaxy has of knowing peace. Surely you know that."

Anakin looked at his son, surprised by his declaration. "Do you really believe that, Luke?" he asked.

Luke nodded. "Yes," he said. "I do. The Empire needs a leader; who better than you to be that leader? And because you have renounced the Dark Side, you are the best chance of resolving the conflict between the Empire and the Alliance."

"Think of it, Ani," Padmé said, growing excited as the ideas jumped into her mind. "You could create a New Republic, slowly change the office of emperor into that of a constitutional monarch, giving power back to the systems, removing the iron grip of the Empire and releasing worlds to govern themselves."

Anakin considered all this as he paced around the room. If what Padmé was saying was true, then didn't he owe it to the galaxy to try?

He turned and looked back at his family. "And what part do you play in this, Padmé?" he asked. "Will you work with me? I'm no politician, as you well know. If I'm going to do this I will need your help." He turned to his children. "Yours as well."

"Luke and I will need to return to the Alliance," Leia replied. "If it's made public knowledge that we are your children, your credibility as Darth Vader will be compromised. But Mother can be your Empress; that way she can help you without raising suspicions."

Anakin turned and looked at Padmé. "Empress Padmé," he mused. "Well you've been a queen, why not an empress too?"

Padmé smiled. "Yes, why not? Of course I couldn't use my real name. We can't take the chance that the Empire will connect me to Anakin Skywalker or else your reign will be a short one."

"Yes, very true," Pielt put in. "You will have to assume the name of Vader, my lady."

"Of course," Padmé replied. She turned to her children. 'I do not like the thought of being separated from you so soon, though,' she said softly. "We just found one another and now it seems we have to be apart again."

"Yes, I thought of that too," Leia said, a frown on her face. "But it cannot be helped."

"I'm sure we can work out something," Luke said. "A meeting place, somewhere out of the way, secluded, where we can be together as a family."

Anakin and Padmé looked at one another, and at the same time, said, "The lake retreat."

"The what?" asked Leia, looking at her parents.

"A special place, very special," Padmé said, her eyes not leaving Anakin's. "Your father and I were married there, it belongs to my family."

"On Naboo?" Luke asked.

"Yes," Padmé replied. "My home."

Piett felt rather awkward at this point, feeling as though he was intruding upon a special family moment. However, there were important matters to attend to, and he knew that his presence was necessary.

"So the way I see it," he spoke up at last, bringing everyone's attention back to the matter at hand. "We need to have a press conference, and reveal the remade Lord Vader, at which time you will announce your ascendancy to the throne."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I suppose time is of the essence. We don't want a civil war breaking out."

"Agreed," Pielt said. "If you will allow me, I will see to that at once, sir. Or should I say, your majesty," he added, extending an exaggerated bow.

Anakin laughed as Pielt left the room. He turned back to his family. "This is all happening so fast," he told them. "We've barely had time to get to know one another, and I feel like we're being torn apart all over again."

"But not forever," Luke reminded his father.

"No, not forever," Anakin said, smiling at his son. "I have no desire to spend the rest of my life as emperor; I'll do what I must, for as long as I must, but my primary focus is you, my family."

Padmé put her arm around Anakin's waist and looked up at him. "That is something we all share, Ani," she said. "We have spent so long apart; we need to spend time getting to know one another."

Anakin looked down at his wife with a smile. "Or getting to know one another all over again," he replied.

She nodded in agreement. "Sounds wonderful."

Chapter 38

CHAPTER 38

"I don't like this, Luke," Leia confided in her brother as they returned to the medical ward.

Luke looked at his sister. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what," she retorted. "Emperor Vader. I'm not so sure I like the idea of giving him that much power."

"You didn't seem to have a problem with it earlier," Luke pointed out. "Why didn't you say something?"

Leia shrugged. "I don't know," she admitted. "I think I'm just trying to be sensitive to Mother. She believes in him, her trust is unwavering. I can't say the same thing, Luke. After all, it wasn't that long ago that he was Darth Vader; how can we be so sure that he won't slip back to the Dark Side when he has that much power in his grasp?"

Luke was silent as he considered his sister's words. No one could be sure of anything, not even Anakin himself. But action was needed, and their plan was as good as any, Luke reasoned.

"We need to have faith that he won't, Leia," he said at last. "I know you have had trouble trusting him; but there isn't time for doubts. If Father doesn't step in and take control, someone else will. Or the Alliance will move in and the fighting will escalate. This is the only way to ensure that the conflict is brought under control."

"Control?" Leia asked. "Control is the very issue I'm talking about, Luke! How can we be so certain that once he has control of the Empire he will graciously dole it out like he says? That much power would be a temptation to anyone, and we're not just talking about anyone, are we? We're talking about a Sith."

"A *former* Sith," Luke countered, growing frustrated with his sister's stubbornness. "He saved your life, Leia, after you tried to kill him. Doesn't that tell you something about him? Why are you so sure that he is not worthy of our trust?"

Leia sighed. "I'm not," she replied. "I'm just....it's just too soon, Luke. I haven't had a chance to accept that he's my father, and now you're asking me to put my trust in him as ruler of the galaxy. It's too much to expect, I can't do it!"

Luke said no more, for he saw his parents standing in the doorway behind Leia. Judging by the look on Anakin's face, he had heard Leia's vehement declaration.

"No one expects you to do anything beyond your means, Leia," Anakin said. She whirled around to see him, her face reddening.

"I... I didn't know you were there," she stammered.

"Obviously not," Anakin replied. *I was a fool to think that she was beginning to accept me*, he thought bitterly. 'I'm sorry you feel this way, but I'm not sure what else I can do to

earn your trust,' he continued, walking into the medical ward. He turned and looked at his daughter. "But perhaps your antipathy towards me will work to our advantage."

Padmé frowned. "How?"

"Leia herself said there mustn't be any connection made between her and Luke and myself," Anakin explained. "No one will suspect that she is my daughter when she harbors such serious doubts of my trustworthiness."

Part of Leia felt badly; she had come a long way towards accepting Anakin as her father, but she would be lying if she said that she was comfortable with this plan. One thing she had learned about her father was that it was impossible to hide her feelings from him, so there seemed little point in trying.

"I'm sorry you still feel that way, Leia," Padmé said sadly. "But perhaps your father is right. You and Darth Vader have had a history of animosity; it wouldn't be believable if you were suddenly a supporter of his."

"Yes, I suppose it would," Leia concurred. She looked up at her father, hating the hurt look in his eyes. "The best way you can earn my trust is to let me give it willingly, and not force me into a situation where I have no choice."

Anakin frowned. "Is that what you think I'm doing?" he challenged.

"Well, yes," Leia retorted. "You are planning on declaring yourself emperor, and expecting that I can accept that without question. Given your history, you have to admit that this is a little much to ask."

"Believe me, Leia," Anakin replied hotly. 'I have no expectations where you are concerned. Perhaps this was all a big mistake,' he said, turning to his wife. "I've changed my mind. I want nothing to do with this plan. I wash my hands of it." He stormed out of the room without so much as a backwards glance.

Padmé closed her eyes and sighed deeply. *Now what?* She asked herself.

"I hope you're happy, Leia," Luke remarked angrily. "Why can't you just put your differences aside? Why can't you see that he is the best chance for mending the divisions in the galaxy?"

"Don't lecture me, Luke!" Leia retorted hotly. "You weren't the one who was subjected to his torture! You weren't the one whose home was destroyed in front of your very eyes! It's not so easy to forgive and forget when you've gone through the hell he has put me through!"

"Enough," Padmé said at last, stepping in. 'No one is questioning your right to be angry about what Darth Vader put you through, Leia,' she said, looking at her daughter. "And Luke, you have no right to question that," she added, addressing her son. "But you are not the only one who has suffered because of the actions of Darth Vader, Leia," she continued, turning back to her daughter. "I really thought you'd learned to accept him, but I guess I was wrong. I'm sorry, I wish there was something I could do to change your opinion of him, but I've done all I can, and so has he. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to see if I can salvage this situation before it's too late."

Padmé left her children at this point. She ran down the corridor after Anakin. “Anakin, wait!” she called as she saw him get onto the lift.

Anakin heard his wife calling him and stopped, holding the door open for her. *Don’t push me right now, Padmé*, he thought to himself.

“Ani, you don’t mean what you said back there,” Padmé said as she joined him in the lift. “You’re angry, understandably so, but...”

“Damn right I’m angry,” he replied hotly. “She is too much, Padmé, too stubborn, too unyielding. I was foolish to ever think that she and I were growing closer. She will never forgive me for what I did to her; and perhaps she’s right not to. Perhaps she’s right; there’s too much Darth Vader still within me to entrust me with that much power.”

Padmé grew frustrated at her husband’s negativism. Was he right? Was there still too much of Darth Vader lurking within him? Anakin Skywalker had never shown such doubt about himself; perhaps it was too soon, perhaps he needed more time... *but there was no time...*

“Listen to me, Anakin,” Padmé said at last, using her best senatorial voice. “Obviously whatever transpired between you and our daughter was tremendously painful to her; otherwise she’d not have such difficulty putting it behind her. She has come a long way, however, in what I understand to be a very short time; you have to be patient with her. Getting angry with her isn’t going to help her trust you.”

Anakin listened to his wife, feeling resentful that she was taking Leia’s side. *Would she be so quick to defend her if she knew that Leia had tried to kill me?* He wondered.

“I understand that she hates me,” Anakin retorted. “And probably always will, no matter what I do. Are you telling me just to accept that?”

“Of course not!” Padmé replied in exasperation. “But you seem to think that she is unjustified in her distrust of you. Put yourself in her place; how would you feel?”

“I don’t know, Padmé,” he replied testily. “I’ve never had a father. And if I’d had one, I’m certain that I never would have tried to kill him, as my daughter has done.”

“When did she do that??” Padmé asked. “I can’t believe that...”
“No, you can’t believe any wrong doing on her part, just mine, is that it?” he cut in angrily, turning away from her as the lift doors opened. Anakin strode down the corridor to his quarters, his wife following him. Neither of them said word until they reached his quarters.

“Anakin, calm down,” Padmé said, becoming alarmed at his growing anger. “You must get past this anger; you’re starting to scare me.”

Anakin looked at his wife, suddenly feeling remorseful for lashing out at her the way he had. *Why was it that the anger still came so quickly?*

“I’m sorry,” he said contritely. “You’re the last person I should be taking this out on. It’s just so damn frustrating, Padmé! I feel like... like I know what I need to do, but I’m not sure I can do it. I’m not sure I can be trusted to do it.”

“Anakin, no one can tell you what to do,” she replied. “No one knows what is in your heart. You have renounced the Dark Side; you have fought back against it, and won. Your son loves you, and accepts you. Your daughter will eventually do so as well; I love you, and want

you back in my life, despite everything. But only you can forgive yourself, no one else can do that. And until you do, you will be forever questioning yourself, never fully trusting that you know what is right. You can't live like that, Ani. You will never be able to be emperor if you are always second guessing yourself."

"Then perhaps I should never have agreed to do it," he replied quietly, turning away from her again.

Padmé shook her head, her patience reaching an end.

"You listen to me, Anakin Skywalker," she said, her dark eyes flashing with emotion. "You are the only person who can put an end to the destructive conflict that has plagued the galaxy for the past 20 years; conflict that you have had a hand in. This is your opportunity to right the wrongs that you helped Palpatine perpetrate. You owe it to the galaxy to try, Ani! You owe it to your children to make this galaxy a better place, a safe and civilized place again. And you owe it to me; I have spent half my life in mourning for what we had, for what we lost because of that monster, Palpatine. We will never be able to get back those years, Anakin," she said, her voice starting to falter. "Never see our children grow up again, never hear their first words..." she put her hands in her face as the emotions overwhelmed her.

Anakin felt his heart aching as Padmé broke down. She had been so strong since they had been reunited; yet there was still so much pain that she carried, so much sadness for the lost years of Luke and Leia's childhood, and for his betrayal of her. He walked over to her and took her by the shoulders. "I'm so sorry," he said softly, pulling her close to him. "So sorry for everything."

Padmé resisted his embrace and pushed at him. "How could you, Ani??" she cried. "How could you think that I had betrayed you? That I had brought Obi-Wan to Mustafar to kill you?? I wouldn't betray you if it meant my own life!! And yet you believed I had! And if it weren't for Obi-Wan, you would have killed me!!" she cried, striking at him with her small fists. "You nearly did kill me, as well as our unborn children!! How could you?? How could you betray me like that??"

Anakin realized that this outburst was long over due, and so he let her vent, knowing that she had undoubtedly wanted to say these things to him for a long time. The trouble was, he had no answers for her burning questions. Looking back, it seemed inconceivable that he could have choked her, but he had. The fact that she was willing to resume a relationship with him at all was miraculous; he would be foolish to think that she did not harbor a lot of anger and pain because of what he had done to her on that terrible day.

And so he let her vent, let her strike away at him, knowing that she needed to get it out of her system, knowing that he deserved everyone of her words of accusation, every one of her blows. Finally she tired herself out, and simply looked up at him, her face streaked with tears. Anakin took her face in his hands and pressed his forehead to hers. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you, Padmé, I promise."

Padmé could only nod as she closed her eyes, feeling exhausted by the emotional catharsis she had just gone through. But when Anakin wrapped his arms around her this time, she did not resist, and melted into his embrace.

“I’ll do it, Padmé,” he said softly, brushing his lips against her hair. “For you, for our children, I will do it.”

Padmé looked up at him and smiled. “I love you, Ani,” she said softly.

Anakin smiled, taking strength in her love. “I love you,” he replied, and bent to kiss her, to show her just how much.

11

Chapter 39

CHAPTER 39

"Everything has been arranged," Piett announced as he sat down at the conference table with Anakin, Padmé, Luke and Leia. "The Imperial press team will be here in 48 hours."

Anakin nodded. "I suppose there's no backing out now," he commented, looking at his wife.

Padmé smiled at him, and put her hand on his. "It will be fine, Ani. You're going to make a great leader."

"I couldn't agree more," Piett concurred with a smile. "But there is a matter of some importance that we still need to discuss."

"What is that?" asked Padmé.

"Concealing your true identities," Piett replied. "We can explain Vader's physical transformation; even provide medical proof that he is who he claims to be. But the faces of both Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala are very recognizable, even after all this time. Are you prepared to reveal your true identity?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea, personally," Luke declared, looking at his parents. "It would undermine your position as Emperor, Father. The Imperial hierarchy would be suspicious of your true motives if they knew that you were really Anakin Skywalker."

"Luke is right," Piett put in. 'And anyone who knew you, milady, would never believe that you would have any part of the Empire, much less to be its Empress.' Anakin nodded. "Very true. Padmé Amidala was known as a champion of democracy, and a defender of the Republic," he said, looking at his wife. "They mustn't know who you truly are, Padmé."

"So what is the solution?" she asked, looking at the three men. She had noticed how quiet Leia was; indeed, she seemed totally absorbed in her own thoughts. "Any ideas, Leia?" Padmé asked her.

Leia shook herself from her reverie and looked up at her mother. "I'm sorry, Mother; what did you say?"

"Mother asked if you had any ideas, Leia," Luke said, annoyed with his sister's seeming indifference to the situation.

"Leia disapproves of this course of action," Anakin said, looking at Leia. "I doubt she has any suggestions to help facilitate it."

Leia met her father's gaze, stung by his remark. She could see the hurt in his eyes as he looked at her. Yet she could not deny what he had said; she did harbor serious doubts about the scheme to make Darth Vader the emperor, and was not about to play the hypocrite and pretend otherwise.

“What about disguises?” she suggested at last, directing her comment to her mother.

“Disguises?” Anakin repeated. “Surely you’re not suggesting that damnable mask again!”

“Well, it would hide your face,” replied Leia calmly, looking back at him. “Isn’t that what you want?”

“It would, but I’m not about to subject myself to that again,” Anakin replied, frowning at the thought of it.

“It’s a moot point,” Piett said. “The mask and all the rest were left on Kamino, and have probably been destroyed by now. Even if they weren’t there’s no time to get them before the press conference. Besides, you are forgetting that your mother requires a disguise as well.”

“No one ever saw Palpatine’s face,” Luke observed. “At least, not unless they were up close, and even then it was only a glimpse.”

“More than *I* ever wanted,” Leia muttered, shuddering at the memory of his deformed visage.

“What is your point, Luke?” Piett asked.

“My point is Father could wear something similar to the hooded cloak that Palpatine wore. He could say that it was traditional garb for the emperor, or that he was wearing it in deference to the late emperor, or some garbage like that,” Luke replied.

Anakin smirked at his son’s obvious disgust for the late ruler.

“That might just work,” Piett replied, nodding thoughtfully. “And perhaps some sort of veiled headpiece for you, my lady.”

Padmé nodded. “I wore rather outlandish headpieces when I was Queen of Naboo. They might serve as an example.”

“Good idea,” Anakin said, smiling at his wife. “I barely recognized you myself in those things.”

Padmé smiled. “Well then, it will work just fine, won’t it?”

As preparations were made for the big announcement, the Skywalker family prepared itself for yet another separation. Luke and Leia were to return to the Rebel Fleet at once; they could not take the chance of the press getting wind of the true reason for their presence on board the star destroyer. No, they were to return to the Alliance as liaisons, unwilling ones, albeit, but liaisons nonetheless. The fact that they had been treated with fairness and consideration while on board the star destroyer would hopefully go far in paving the way to an amicable meeting between the new emperor and the Rebel leaders. Of course, that was still weeks away; Emperor Vader had much work to do before such an overture of peace could be extended to his lifelong enemies. He had much to prove to the leaders of the Rebellion before they would even consider speaking with him in terms of truce. Darth Vader had spent two decades carving a name for himself as a ruthless monster throughout the galaxy; it would take more than the word of Luke Skywalker and, perhaps, the Princess Leia Organa to convince the rest of the Alliance that he could be trusted.

"We will be following the news of your announcement," Luke told his parents as he and Leia prepared to board the Millennium Falcon. "I wish we could be here with you," he added.

"So do I," Anakin replied. "I could use your support, Luke."

Luke smiled at his father. "Well, we'll work it all out somehow."

"I hope so, son," Anakin replied. "Have a safe journey, and may the Force be with you."

"May the Force be with you, Father," Luke said. He held out his hand to Anakin, but his father pulled him into his arms to give him a big bear hug. Luke smiled, hugging his father back.

Leia watched the exchange between her brother and her father, a strange feeling of jealousy invading her. *How was Luke able to accept him so readily? How could he trust someone who a mere month ago had been the most feared, ruthless being in the galaxy?* Part of Leia envied her brother's relationship with their father. There had been times in the past week when she had felt close to him, connected to him; times when she had seen glimpses of the man he had once been. *But there was too much water under the bridge... too much history..too much pain...*

"Leia?"

Leia turned to see her mother standing before her. "We'll be in touch," Leia said as she hugged her mother. "Good luck with everything."

Padmé looked at her daughter, knowing her well enough even after such a short time to know that she was preoccupied. She had seen the way that Leia watched Luke and Anakin's interaction, and realized that, in spite of herself, Leia was beginning the healing process. She *wanted* to accept Anakin; of that, Padmé was sure. It was only a matter of time now.

"What is it?" she asked.

Leia shook her head. "Nothing," she muttered. "I'm fine."

Padmé frowned, frustrated with how much Leia was like her father. *Maybe that's why they can't get along...*

"Open your heart, Leia," Padmé advised her softly, touching her daughter's face. "Not just your mind."

Leia looked at her mother, amazed by her ability to forgive. Surely the wrongs that her father had committed against her mother were far worse than those committed against her; and yet, she not only had forgiven him, she clearly loved him. *Will I ever be able to do that?*

"Goodbye Mother," Luke said, embracing his mother next. Leia watched, acutely aware that her father's eyes were fixed on her. Finally she turned to him. He merely watched her, waiting for her to speak, seeing by the set of her shoulders and the look in her eyes that she was too stubborn to break the ice first.

"Have a safe voyage," Anakin said at last.

"Thanks," Leia said at last. 'Good luck with...everything.'

"Thank you Leia," Anakin replied, smiling at her. He knew that he couldn't push her. She had

come a long way towards accepting him, but obviously needed more time. *Time isn't something we have a lot of I'm afraid*, he reflected. "May the Force be with you."

Leia nodded. "Thank, you too. All set Luke?" she asked, turning to her brother.

"Yep," Luke said. "Ready whenever you are."

"We'll see you soon," Padmé said, watching her twins disappear into the Flacon. Anakin walked over and put his arm around her shoulders, seeing how upset she was to watch them leave.

"We *will* see them again soon, won't we Ani?" she asked as they left the hangar bay.

Anakin did not know how to respond. The future was so uncertain and unpredictable; he truly did not know what would happen once the announcement that he was now emperor was made. *Would civil war ensue? Would enemies and assassins surface to challenge him? Would his true identity be revealed?* There was so much at stake, and so much that could go wrong; but so much that could be accomplished as well. *A chance to repair all the damage... a chance to bring peace to a galaxy that had known nothing but war for more than two decades...*

"I hope so, Padmé," Anakin replied at last. "I truly do. But we have no way of predicting when. It all depends on how successful we are in our plans."

Padmé nodded. "This has to work, Ani," she said. "We have a golden opportunity to set things right, to bring back to the galaxy what was lost all those years ago because of Palpatine's ruthless ambition."

Anakin sighed. "He wasn't alone in his ambition, Padmé," he said. "I am responsible for what happened just as much as he was."

"But you are going to set things right, Anakin," Padmé reminded him, taking his hand. "You are atoning for what you did, and once you're emperor, you will have a chance to put things right."

Anakin nodded. *Let's just hope I am given that chance...*

Chapter 40

CHAPTER 40

"How's this?"

Anakin looked over at his wife. "You're not really going to wear that, are you?" he asked, trying to hide his smile.

Padmé frowned, her hands on her hips. "Anakin Skywalker, are you laughing at me?"

"Me?" he asked, his face straight. "Never. You look... divine."

Padmé snorted and turned back to the mirror. "I look ridiculous," she muttered.

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything," Anakin said, looking at her reflection over her shoulder. "But yes, yes you do."

She turned around and gave him a poke in the stomach.

"Hey! I'm just being honest, Padmé!" he said, stepping back and rubbing his abdomen, trying hard not to laugh.

Padmé shook her head. "Well it will serve the purpose," she said, adjusting the veil ever so slightly. "That's all that matters."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, this is true." He pulled the hood up on his new, ebony cloak. 'Alright, my turn,' he said, turning to her. "Can you see my face?"

Padmé removed the elaborate headpiece and veil and peered up at him. "I can see your eyes," she said. "But only from up close."

Anakin turned and looked in the mirror. From a distance he could not see any features of his face, only the dark shadow cast by the deep cowl of his cloak. "I guess this is good enough," he said, looking over his outfit. He wore a long sleeved cloak, much like the one he had worn as a Jedi, of the deepest black. It hid his features completely, the only hint of his appearance being his great height and width of his chest and shoulders. But this alone would not be enough to identify his true identity, for Darth Vader was well known for his immense size.

"What do you think, Padmé? Is this good enough? Please say yes; I really, *really* don't want to wear a mask again."

She looked up at him again and studied him. "I think it will do, Ani," she said. "No one will be able to see who you are. And it will be only for public appearances anyway, right? We won't have to wear these ridiculous outfits when we're alone."

Anakin shook his head. "No, of course not. In the privacy of our home we will be able to be ourselves. And hopefully our reign will be a short one."

"Let's hope so," Padmé replied. "Nothing would make me happier than to resume a quiet life of anonymity."

Anakin smiled. "Yes, I couldn't agree more; though somehow I can't quite imagine such a thing."

"No, our lives have been anything but quiet, haven't they?" she commented softly.

Anakin looked at his wife, regret filling him over the lost years, the years they had been cheated out of. "I have cost you so much, Padmé," he said, fresh guilt welling up within him. "Caused you so much pain. I'm still astonished that you are willing to have anything to do with me."

Padmé sighed. Despite her assurances, her declaration of love, and her steadfast support of him in his quest, he still had so much self doubt and recrimination. Padmé feared that if he was never able to forgive himself for his past transgressions he would never completely be redeemed.

"Anakin, we've already been through this," she replied at last. "I forgive you, Anakin. Can't you see that? I love you! Isn't the fact that I'm still here with you proof of it?"

"Yes, of course it is," he said, lowering his hood. "And I am grateful beyond words for your forgiveness, and your love, Padmé. I know I don't deserve them, nor will I ever be able to make up for what I..."

"Anakin, stop it," Padmé said at last, taking him by the arms. "Will you stop it? You have to let go of the past, and not let it destroy you all over again. It worries me when you talk this way! It worries me that you will let the darkness take you again, that your own self-hatred will prevent you from ever truly being Anakin Skywalker again."

Anakin looked at her. The same thoughts had crossed his mind as well, for as much as he had changed, as much as he had renounced Darth Vader, he knew that the shadows of the Dark Side still lingered within him.

"I won't let you slip away, Ani," she said at last, seeing the doubts in his eyes. "I won't lose you again. I couldn't go through that again."

"You won't lose me, Padmé," Anakin said, taking her face in his hands. "No matter what happens, I will never leave you again."

Padmé tried to take comfort in his words, but they only created another level of anxiety within her. *No matter what happens? What does that mean??*

"Well are we all set?" asked Piett as he entered the room and joined Anakin and Padmé.

"I think so," Anakin replied, releasing his wife. "Have the wolves arrived?"

Piett smiled. "Not yet," he said. "But they are due to arrive within the next 6 hours or so. How are you feeling?"

Anakin sighed and looked at his wife. "Not bad, all things considered. The cloak's sleeves are too short, though," he said, looking down at his wrists. "I'm going to get this altered. I'll be back shortly."

"Alright," Padmé said as he left them. She sighed and looked up at Piett, wondering if she ought to confide in him. He had proven to be a trusted friend and ally in all this; surely he was

an honorable man.

"I'm worried about him, Firmus," she said, a frown creasing her brow.

Piett frowned, and nodded. "Yes, I can see that. What is wrong?"

Padmé walked about in the small room, trying to put her fears into words.

Piett watched her as she gathered her thoughts. He too had been concerned with Anakin's moodiness, but hadn't said anything. He merely attributed it to the stress of the situation; but perhaps there was more to it than he knew.

"As strange as this sounds, you probably know my husband better than me in some respects," she began.

Piett's eyes widened at hearing this unexpected statement. "I doubt that very much, my lady," he said.

"Do you?" she asked. "He hasn't been in my life for more than twenty years now, Piett. And the man he is right now is not the man I knew."

"Nor is he the man I knew," Piett put in. "Is that what this is about? Are you concerned that he is still Darth Vader? Because I can assure you that he is not."

"No, that's not what I mean," Padmé said. 'Although I never knew Darth Vader personally, I knew enough about him to see that. But my concern is that he is neither, that he is somehow caught between the two, not completely one or the other.'

Piett frowned. "I'm afraid you've lost me, my lady," he admitted.

Padmé sighed, frustrated at her inability to voice her feelings adequately. "Think of it this way; would he have chosen redemption if circumstances had not unraveled as they had? Was it the fact that Palpatine had the twins and I held captive that forced Vader to turn against his master?"

Piett considered her words. Was it the fact that his family had suddenly and unexpectedly been brought together that had acted as the catalyst in his transformation?

"I'm not sure I can answer that, my lady," Piett replied at last. "Things have happened so quickly ever since he discovered that it was your son who destroyed the Death Star. There certainly hadn't been time for him to even consider what his actions have meant."

"Exactly," Padmé said, relieved that he was starting to understand. "The situation with Palpatine forced his hand, forcing him into a series of events that eventually brought him to this point where he is now. Is it any wonder he is confused and second guessing himself?"

"Not at all, Piett replied," anyone would be in the same situation. But if what you believe is true, that he is caught between being Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader, not fully one or the other, then he is in a very precarious situation."

Padmé felt a cold rush of fear spread through her. "Yes, I know," she replied. "And he is about to assume more power than anyone in the galaxy."

Piett looked at Padmé and merely nodded. "Yes, he is," he replied. "Power like that can be very dangerous. If there is any trace of Darth Vader left within him, it could be very dangerous indeed."

Padmé shook her head. “I won’t lose him to the Dark Side, Piett,” she averred. “Not again.”

Piett frowned. “I pray you won’t, my lady,” he said. “Because the galaxy would never be the same if a remade Emperor Vader was unleashed upon it.”

Piett’s words gave Padmé a chill down her spine. *I won’t let that happen... no matter what it takes, I will keep Anakin from slipping into the Darkness again...*

“You’re right,” she replied. “That is why I am going to be with him through this, Piett. I will not let the darkness take him again. I swear it.”

Piett nodded, admiring her tremendously. “With you at his side, Anakin Skywalker is bound to triumph over Darth Vader.”

Padmé smiled grimly. *That is what I am counting on. That is what my very life is depending on.*

“Admiral Piett.”

“Excuse me, my lady,” Piett said as he heard the comm.. “Piett here.”

“Sir, we just received word. The transport carrying the press corps has just left hyperspace. They will be here within the hour.”

Piett glanced up at Padmé. “Understood. We’ll be right there. Piett out. Well my lady, looks like it’s show time.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, so it seems. I will find Anakin and meet you on the bridge.”

“Very well, see you shortly.”

Padmé watched him leave and then turned back to the mirror. With trembling hands she set the elaborate headpiece in place and brought the veil before her face. She stared at herself in the mirror, only her dark eyes showing above the black gauzy fabric. Satisfied that she looked the part, she turned and left the room in search of her husband. *Let this work*, she prayed as she made her way through the corridors of the ship. *Please... let this work...*

Chapter 41

CHAPTER 41

Reporters and their equipment filled the gallery; the mood was one of excitement and anticipation. Speculation about the reason for this press conference was rampant, though most guessed that it had something to do with the rumors of the death of the emperor. There were some who had even heard that Darth Vader had died also, but no one knew for sure.

Piett stood by calmly watching the reporters jockeying for position in front of the makeshift platform that had been erected for the purpose of this conference. He hated the press; they always managed to find some dirt to publish about the military, usually inaccurate, and always sensationalized.

A door on the other side of the room opened, and a hush fell on the crowd as a pair of figures clad all in black entered. One was tall, obviously male, and wore a floor length cloak that extended to the tips of his fingers and brushed the floor as he walked. His face was covered by the deep cloak, but judging by his stride and the breadth of his chest and shoulders, he was young and strong. At his side walked a small, feminine figure, dressed in a flowing black gown, elaborate tiara and veil. Holo-recorders flashed and hummed furiously as the elegant, mysterious couple made their way across the platform to the podium that had been placed at the far end.

“Your attention please,” Piett announced, having moved to the front of the platform. He waited until the room was silent before continuing.

“Welcome to the *Executor*,” Piett continued once he had the attention of the room’s occupants. ‘We are aware of the number of rumors being bandied about the sector, and that is why we called this conference. It is my sad duty to announce the demise of Emperor Palpatine,’ he began. “This news comes as no surprise I’m sure,” he continued, amid a small hum of murmurs in the room.

“What about Lord Vader?” one reporter shouted out.

Piett turned his attention to the man, a frown forming on his brow. “Questions shall be fielded at the conclusion of this meeting,” he said. “I would ask you to hold them until then. But since the question has been asked, I will address it, as it is pertinent to the reason you are all here. The late emperor died without issue, and so the succession has been passed to his right hand, Lord Darth Vader,” he concluded, gesturing to the cloaked figure on the platform behind him.

There was an immediate reaction to this news, and it was both loud and incredulous. Anakin turned and looked at his wife, uneasy by the reaction of the crowd. He could see that he needed to take charge of the situation, and stepped to the front of the platform. Putting up one hand, he immediately brought the room to attention, all eyes now on the mysterious cloaked figure before them.

“You no doubt have questions,” Anakin began, looking around the room at the shocked faces of the reporters. “I will answer them now.”

Hands shot up immediately, all wanting the scoop on the new emperor.

“We all heard rumors that you had been killed, Lord Vader; how can we be sure that you are in fact Darth Vader?” one woman asked.

“There is ample medical proof to verify my identify,” Anakin replied. “It is available for you to view at any time you wish.”

“Lord Vader, you have obviously undergone some sort of physical transformation. Can you tell us anything about it?”

“I underwent extensive reconstructive surgery recently. I am no longer dependent upon the mask and respirator that I lived in for 20 years. I am fully human once again.”

“Was there a reason you underwent such drastic surgery? And if it was possible, why did you wait so long?”

“Those are personal questions,” Anakin replied, becoming annoyed with their prying. “I will not answer them.”

Mutters went around the room.

“Is that a woman with you? Who is she?”

Anakin turned to Padmé and held his hand out for her. She put her hand in his, feeling tremendously nervous at being centered out this way. “This is the Lady Vader,” Anakin replied. “My wife.”

This announcement brought a huge reaction. Darth Vader has a *wife*? It hardly seemed possible.

“How long have you been married? Were you his wife in secret all these years?”

“I believe my husband said that he would not answer any questions of a personal nature,” Padmé spoke up. “And neither will I.”

“Will we be permitted to see your face now that you have taken off the mask?”

“No, you will not.”

“Why, Lord Vader? Surely you realize the galaxy is curious to see what you look like, and certainly your wife now that it has been revealed that you have one.”

“That may well be,” Anakin replied, trying to remain calm, but growing annoyed at the man’s insistence. “But just like my predecessor, I reserve the right to remain anonymous.”

“But surely....”

“Are you deaf?” Anakin snapped when the man persisted. “You are unworthy to look upon the face of the emperor, and certainly that of the empress! Do not press me in this matter, or you shall regret it.”

The man felt a tightening in his throat, and reached his hands up quickly. Padmé watched in shocked, silent horror, knowing what was happening, knowing exactly how the man felt. She wanted more than anything to run out of the room, to detach herself from the situation; but she knew that would compromise Anakin's position. She pulled her hand from his, and stepped away, unable to hide her feelings. Anakin turned with surprise as he felt her hand leave his. Padmé looked up at Anakin, only her eyes visible; but in their dark depths Anakin could see the fear and horror she felt, and immediately released the man, who fell to his knees, gasping for air.

"If there are no further questions," Piett said, trying to break the tension, "we shall conclude this conference."

The reporters looked at one another, none of them wishing to ask another question after the last one had caused such a terrible reaction from the new emperor. It was obvious that Lord Vader had not changed as much as he had appeared to.

As the reporters filed out of the room, Padmé took the opportunity to leave as well, making her way towards the separate entrance she and Anakin had used earlier.

"Padmé wait," Anakin called after her as he followed her out into the corridor.

Padmé did not stop, and so Anakin had to run to catch up to her. She felt him take her by the elbow and turn her around to face him.

"Padmé, why are you running away like this?" he asked in exasperation. "Let's talk about this."

"Talk?" she said. "Talk about it? What's to be said, Anakin? Or maybe I should call you Vader." She turned and walked away. Anakin watched her for a moment or two, and then took off after her.

"Don't do this, Padmé," he said as he entered her quarters, not bothering to use the door chime.

She turned and looked at him, her hands clenched tightly on the headpiece that she had removed.

"What am *I* doing?" she asked as she tossed it onto her bed. "I wasn't the one who nearly killed a man back there!"

"I didn't kill him, Padmé," Anakin replied calmly. "I merely used him as an example. I cannot have any dissention, anyone questioning my authority, can't you see that?"

"I see," she replied. "So if anyone questions you, you kill them? Is that it?"

"No, of course not, it's just..."

"It's just what, Anakin? What are you going to say to explain this? Because right now I feel like I'm talking to Darth Vader, not Anakin Skywalker."

Anakin frowned. "But I *am* Darth Vader, Padmé," he replied. "At least I have to behave like him if this bid to be the emperor is to be successful. Don't you understand?"

Padmé felt the tears brimming; her throat tightening as she fought back the terror and sorrow that filled her. “I don’t like this,” she said quietly. “It’s too dangerous. How can you be sure that you won’t become Darth Vader again if you pretend to be him? If you act like him, what is the difference? You *will* become him again! And if that happens....”

Anakin waited for her to finish her sentence, afraid to hear what she was going to say.

“I won’t become Darth Vader again,” he said at last, taking her by the arms. “I thought you understood that, I thought you believed in me, Padmé.”

His words and the hurt in his eyes grabbed her heart. If she had any doubts about his identity crisis before, they were gone now. He *was* caught between the two identities, neither completely on the Dark Side, nor in the Light, straddling the line between the two. *And it’s up to me to make sure he doesn’t fall onto the wrong side...*

She turned her eyes up to his. *This is going to be the hardest thing I’ve ever done*, she thought to herself. *But I’m his only hope... if I abandon him now; he will undoubtedly slip into the darkness again.*

“I *do* believe in you, Ani,” she said, softening her voice. “I...I really do. It’s just not easy..”

Anakin sighed, wanting to pull her into his embrace, not sure if he should. “I know it isn’t,” he replied. “It isn’t easy for me, either. But one thing I know is that I can’t get through this without you. I need you, Padmé. I need your support, your love; without them I know I would be lost.”

Padmé could see in his eyes the depth of his fear. It seemed that he was just as scared as she was of what could happen. He had gone through the fear of losing her all those years ago alone, and he had ended up in Darkness. Padmé was determined not to let him be alone this time.

“I’m not going anywhere, Anakin,” she said, taking his face in her hands. “As long as you need me, I will be here. I’m not going to leave you alone, not now, not ever.”

Anakin pulled her to him, holding her tightly as he fought against his own tears. “Help me, Padmé,” he whispered. “Help me to stay here with you, with our children. I don’t know if I’m strong enough to do this alone.”

Padmé closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against his chest. He was not her Ani, not yet; but the love she bore him was just as strong, just as deep as if he were. And he needed her. The fact that he willingly admitted it told Padmé that he wanted desperately to overcome the temptation of the Dark Side, and she was determined to help him to do just that.

Chapter 42

CHAPTER 42

"Let me get this straight," Han Solo asked as he folded his arms over his chest. "You were on board the flag ship of the Empire, Darth Vader's ship, and you were never interrogated? Never threatened? Intimidated? Nothing??"

"That's right," Luke replied. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Luke, we're talking about Darth Vader here," Han replied, puzzled by his friend's question. "You know him, big man, black cape. Not exactly the friendliest guy in the galaxy."

"Yes, we know him," Leia put in. "The same one who arranged for your debt to Jabba the Hutt to be paid." Leia put in.

Han looked at her. "Yeah, right," he muttered. "I still don't get that. So if you weren't there as prisoners, then why were you there for so long.?"

Luke and Leia exchanged a look. They had decided that they couldn't tell their friends in the Alliance anything about what had transpired over the past three weeks, realizing that it would compromise their parents' plans to take over control of the Empire. Still, Han was their closest friend. Surely he could be trusted to keep their secret.

"If we tell you Han, you have to swear to keep it secret," Leia said at last. "The future of the galaxy depends upon it."

Han's eyes widened at her pronouncement. "Whoa... this sounds big. What's goin' on?"

"First you have to promise not to say anything to anyone," Luke said.

"Alright kid, you know me," Han replied, making a zipping motion over his mouth. "I'll put it in my vault. Now spill it."

Luke exchanged an amused look with his twin before he began. "Well, it's kind of complicated," he commenced. "I hardly know where to start."

Han waited as patiently as he could for Luke to continue. Finally he did so.

"Leia and I have found out that we are actually brother and sister," Luke began.

"Huh??"

"Twins," Leia put in. "We're twins. We were separated at birth because of our parentage, well, actually because of who our father is, and what happened to him."

"Our mother nearly died when we were born, and we were taken away from her," Luke continued. "In order to keep us safe from our father and the emperor."

"Hold it, hold it," Han said at this point, putting his hands in front of him. "Slow down. Who is your father that you needed to be protected from him??"

Leia and Luke looked at one another, neither one of them wanting to say it.

"Our father is Anakin Skywalker," Luke began. "He was a great Jedi Knight, the greatest ever, but he was manipulated by the emperor, and fell to the Dark Side. It did it in order to save our mother, but that's another story. The bottom line is, he became Darth Vader."

Han's mouth actually fell open at this point. "*Darth Vader...* Darth Vader is your *father*?? Is that what you are telling me??"

Luke nodded. "Yes, that's it."

"That's why he wanted to talk to you on Bespin?" Han asked Leia next. "To drop this little bomb shell on you?"

Leia smirked. "Yes, that's exactly right."

"I can't believe it," Han muttered in disbelief. "This is...it's... so how come he's just telling you this now?" Han asked, not even sure what to say.

"He thought we were dead," Luke continued. "He was told by the emperor that our mother had died before giving birth to us. He as believed us to be dead all these years, and only recently found out that we were alive."

"Our mother is alive too, as it turns out," Leia put in. "She was being held prisoner by the emperor, who also held Luke and I prisoner."

Han's head was beginning to spin. *Darth Vader is Luke and Leia's father... their mother is alive... the emperor held them all prisoner... am I going crazy?*

"I'm sure this is all pretty shocking," Leia said, seeing the look in Han's eyes. "It's been at least that for Luke and me too."

"So how did you get away from him?" Han asked. "I can't imagine Vader letting you two go once he had you in his clutches."

"He's changed," Luke said. "He's not the same evil Sith Lord that we've all come to hate and fear; he's Anakin Skywalker again, Han. Saving Leia and our mother from Palpatine changed him. He killed the emperor for what he did to all of us."

"Vader killed the emperor??" Han asked. "You mean the Empire is finished?"

"No, not exactly," Leia replied. "Actually our father is going to be the emperor now," she replied.

"*That* was your father?" Han asked. "We saw the press conference on the holonet." He didn't look like Darth Vader at all."

"Well that's a story in itself," Luke said. "Sit down, Han. We might as well start at the beginning."

Han listened in shock, surprise, amazement and incredulity as Luke and Leia related all that had transpired over the past weeks. So much had happened that Han felt as though his brain was going to short circuit from all the information.

“You realize that Mon Mothma is going to want a full report of where you were?” Han asked. “How are you going to explain all this and still keep your parents’ secret?”

“We haven’t figured that out yet,” Luke replied. “Any ideas?”

Han shook his head. “Not a clue, kid. I can’t get over all this; you’re Darth Vader’s kids....I can’t even imagine what a shock that must have been for you guys.”

“No kidding,” Leia muttered. “Not exactly good news to find out that your worst enemy is actually your father.”

“Yeah I bet,” Han replied. “Though I have to admit that I’m grateful to him for cleaning up that mess with Jabba. Any idea why he’d do that?”

Leia’s face grew warm as she recalled how easily her father had recognized her feelings for Han. She was the reason he helped Han, plain and simple. But how could she tell him that without having to express her true feelings to him?

“I think Leia can explain that better than me,” Luke said at last, sensing his twin’s embarrassment. “I’ll catch up with you two later.”

Han, who was growing more perplexed by the minute, watched Luke leave and then turned back to Leia.

“Something you want to say to me, Leia?” he asked, watching her closely.

Leia had been a senator before her 17th birthday, was a princess and accustomed to handling delicate diplomatic situations; but this conversation made her want to crawl into a hole and hide.

“Well, yes,” she said, not meeting his eyes. “I guess so.”

Han didn’t say anything, but merely watched her squirm, enjoying her discomfort immensely.

“The thing is, well,” Leia began, examining the table top that she was standing next to. “Vader helped you because of me.”

Han nodded. “You mean because we’re...friends. Sort of.”

Leia looked up at him. He wasn’t about to make this easy. In fact, he even seemed to be enjoying her mortification.

“I suppose so,” she said, meeting his eyes.

Han lifted an eyebrow, not convinced she was being completely forthcoming. “That’s it?” he asked. “So why was that so hard to say? Unless there’s more that you’re not telling me.”

Leia frowned, hating the way he could cut through her smokescreen every time. “What more could there be?”

Han smiled and walked over to her. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe he saw the way you were looking at me.”

“Excuse me??” Leia retorted. “And how was that??”

“Like you were worried, like you cared about what happened to me,” he replied, stopping when he was standing right in front of her.

“Of course I care about what happens to you,” she replied, getting uneasy by the proximity of him. “You’re a valuable member of the Alliance, a natural leader...”
“Yeah yeah, I’ve heard all that before,” Han replied. “But that’s not what I’m talking about and you know it.”

Leia made no response, her heart starting to pound within her as he got closer to uncovering her secret.

“I seem to recall we were getting pretty close when we were on Bespin,” he continued. “Or was that just my imagination?”

Leia looked down at her feet. “No, that wasn’t your imagination,” she muttered.

Han lifted her chin so that she was looking in his eyes. “What are you afraid of, Leia?” he asked softly. “I would never hurt you, you know that.”

“I know,” she replied, mesmerized by his hazel eyes. “I guess I’m just not accustomed to, well, to...”

“Falling in love?” Han offered, a lop-sided grin on his face.

Damn him... Leia thought in frustration. *How does he do that? Yet, what’s the point of lying anymore? Life is too short not to be totally honest about our feelings.*

“Yes, that’s it,” she relied, looking into his eyes. “I never imagined it would happen to me, particularly not with a scruffy looking, arrogant nerf herder like you,” she said with a smile.

Han laughed at her unusual declaration. He put his hands on her shoulders. “I love you too,” he said softly and pulled her close to kiss her.

Chapter 43

CHAPTER 43

Padmé stood in the enormous room, having a difficult time thinking of the enormous estate as her new home. The ceiling vaulted high above her, the décor austere and masculine. The only part of her new home that she felt comfortable in was the enormous garden behind the building. It seemed oddly out of place here, amid the stark, utilitarian feel of the rest of the estate.

“The rooms are ready,” Anakin said as he descended the enormous winding staircase. “I’m having our things moved in right away.”

Padmé nodded in understanding. “This place is enormous,” she commented. “It’s hard to imagine you living here all alone.”

“I didn’t,” Anakin replied as he reached her. ‘I have never lived here, Padmé. The emperor had this place made for me as a gift, but I never spent a single day living in it.’ He looked around the huge room. “It’s just too... big. What would I need with a place like this?”

“Well you’re the emperor now,” she commented. “It’s expected that you’d live in something palatial.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” he replied. “And since Luke and I pretty much destroyed the official residence of the emperor, I suppose this will have to suffice.”

Padmé frowned. “I wouldn’t live in that place,” she said, remembering her incarceration there. “I’d not set foot in that place for anything.”

“I know,” he replied. “Neither would I. I’ve ordered what’s left of it to be torn down.”

“Good,” she replied. She sighed. “I miss Luke and Leia,” she said.

It had been a week since they had left, and almost that long since the Vaders had declared themselves rulers of the galaxy. As expected, the transition had been without incident: so far. A formal inaugural reception was in the works, affording the most powerful members of the Imperial bureaucracy to meet their new emperor, offer their congratulations and pledge their fealty.

The thought of a formal affair was immensely unappealing to Anakin, who had always hated the hypocrisy of politics. Yet being emperor meant socializing with the Empire’s elite. He was glad that Padmé was with him in this, for she possessed the grace and natural charm her new station required.

“The gardens are beautiful,” Padmé said as they walked out onto the balcony. “I was quite surprised to see them.”

Anakin placed his hands on the stone railing and looked below at the panoply of colors. “I insisted on it,” he told her. “It was my tribute to you, Padmé,” he added, turning to look at her.

Padme was stunned by his words. “Really?” she asked.

He simply nodded. “Yes, there are a number of species native to Naboo down there,” he said, indicating the forest of flowers below. “All of your favorites.”

Padme was touched by this revelation and put her hand on his arm. “You did that for me?”

“Of course,” he replied. ‘My love for you has never waned, Padme; not even when I thought you were dead.’ He looked back down at the garden. “I wanted to have some way of commemorating your memory, and what better way? It seems foolish I know, since I never lived here; but even though I didn’t, I insisted that this garden be tended to and cared for.”

Padmé was moved by his admission. It seemed so unlikely that Darth Vader would do such a thing, and it made her realize that Anakin Skywalker had still existed deep within the dark armored Sith Lord. *Just as Darth Vader exists deep within Anakin Skywalker now...* she reflected.

“I think it’s beautiful,” she said at last. “And a beautiful tribute. Thank you, Ani,” she said, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek.

Anakin kept his eyes on the gardens below. His relationship with his wife was in an awkward state, and he wasn’t sure if things would change in the near future. Although he felt certain that the love they had always felt for one another was just as strong as it had ever been, he was not certain that she was ready to resume all aspects of their marriage. It had been over twenty years since they had enjoyed marital relations... *twenty long, lonely years...* His desire for her had not waned at all during that time, but he could not help but wonder if she felt the same way. Since being reunited they had shared kisses, hugs, but nothing beyond that. Still, life aboard a star destroyer was anything but private; and with their children and Piett always around, there had been little opportunity to go beyond the most innocent of embraces. But now they were in what would be their home, and, for the first time in their marriage, were openly married. There was no need to hide their relationship. *Ironic* he mused *since our relationship is barely beyond that of friendship right now...*

“Excuse me, your majesty.”

Anakin, who was still not accustomed to being addressed in that matter, turned to the protocol droid standing behind him and Padmé.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I have the menu for the reception here for your approval,” it said, handing a datapad to Anakin. “The kitchen staff needs to know what to purchase.”

Anakin glanced down at the datapad. *As if I have a clue...* he reflected. He handed it to Padmé. “I think you’d better see to this,” he said with a smile. “I’m out of my league.”

Padmé laughed and took it from him, scanning over the list quickly. Anakin watched her as she did so. He had been trying hard to keep the dark side at bay, for he knew how much he had frightened her on that day of the press conference. So far it had been easy, for everyone seemed to be bending over backwards to please him. He wasn’t fool enough to think that this would always be the case, however; and hoped that he would be able to keep his anger in check should it be roused.

"It looks fine," Padmé decided as she handed the datapad back to the droid. "Tell the kitchen staff to proceed"

"Very good, your majesty," the droid replied, bowing formally to Padmé.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to being called that," Anakin commented as they walked back inside.

"It does take some getting used to," Padmé replied. "I remember feeling that way when I was first nominated queen. That was so long ago."

"It was," Anakin remarked. 'We were just children. But I remember that day we met as clearly as though it was yesterday,' he recalled with a smile. "So much has happened since that day, hasn't it? So much damage, so much pain..."

Padmé watched as her husband's mood changed right before her eyes. It bothered her how mercurial he was, how sullen he could still be. She had hoped that her presence in his life would help him shed the shadow of darkness that still lurked within him; time would tell if she could.

"Come on, your majesty," she said, linking her arm through his. "Let's look around. I'm anxious to see the rest of this place."

Anakin looked down at his wife and smiled. She always had a magic touch when it came to him; even in his darkest moods she could lift his spirits with just a smile. She truly was the best chance he had of conquering the dark side once and for all.

"Right this way, my empress," he said, taking her hand.

Anakin led her around the castle, showing her the high towers, the library, the formal sitting room. It was getting dark outside by the time they had completed their tour and were sitting down to a late supper.

"So what do you think of your palace, my empress?" asked Anakin as they ate their dinner together.

"Very impressive," she replied. "And quite beautiful."

"It's not exactly the lake retreat on Naboo, is it?" he asked.

"Well, it's every bit as grand," she replied. 'But no, that place holds a special spot in my heart, Anakin,' she added softly. "So many wonderful memories are associated with that place."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I agree," he replied. "Our first kiss took place on the balcony there, remember?"

Padmé smiled. "Yes, I remember. You were so confused, poor Ani. I feel badly about how I tried to deny the way I felt about you."

"Don't ever feel badly for anything, Padmé," Anakin replied. "You were only trying to prevent us from doing something rash."

"I know, but in the end, we went ahead and did it anyway," she mused.

Anakin looked at her, trying to determine if she harbored regrets for their marriage. *Not that I could blame her if she did...*

"We were young and impetuous," he said at last. "A dangerous combination."

"Do you regret it?" she asked.

"There is so much in my life that I regret, Padme; but marrying you isn't one of them," he replied at once. "The short time we were together was the only time in my life that I was completely happy."

Padme was moved by his words. There were times when she felt certain that she had her old Ani back, times like this when he said things that made her heart melt; but then his eyes would harden, as his own self-condemnation took over. *If only he could learn to forgive himself, if only he could learn to let go of the past...*

"I feel the same way," Padme replied softly, looking down at her meal. 'Even though I had to endure so much because of....what happened, I have never regretted loving you, Anakin,' she said, looking up at him. "And I have never stopped loving you, either. I hope you realize that."

Anakin nodded. "I do, Padmé; it astonishes me that you feel that way, but I do realize it. I'm not deserving of that love, however; but I am grateful for it just the same."

"Please stop saying that, Anakin," she replied, looking him in the eyes.

He frowned. "What?" he asked defensively. "What am I saying that you object to??"

Padme sighed. "You keep saying you don't deserve my love," she replied. "If you didn't deserve it, do you think I'd be here with you right now? How many times do I have to tell you that I'm here because I want to be, that I need to be?"

"I don't doubt that, Padme," he responded. "It's just that... I'm not sure you understand that I am not the man I was. I'm not even sure who I am at this point. And I don't want you getting hurt by having expectations that I am unable to meet."

"What expectations are you talking about?" Padme asked, beginning to grow angry with his attitude. "I don't expect things to be the way they were, Anakin; I'm not a fool."

"I didn't mean to imply that you are," Anakin responded in frustration. "I'm just so afraid of hurting you again, Padmé, even unwittingly. Can't you see that?"

Padme sighed. "Yes, I understand how you feel, Ani, truly I do; but you have to trust that I am strong enough to go through this metamorphosis with you. You are so afraid to hurt me that you are keeping me at arms length, and that hurts me more."

"At arms length?" he said. "Is that what you think?"

Padme nodded. "Yes, it is," she replied. 'Why else haven't you touched me the way you used to touch me?' she asked softly. "Unless you don't want me anymore."

"Don't say that," he retorted. "How can you even think that?? I can't tell you the number of nights I have lain awake, unable to sleep because of the longing I felt for you! There hasn't

been a day in the past 22 years that I haven't thought of you, Padme. You are in my soul, you always have been. I can scarcely draw a breath that I don't need you."

Padme did not respond, but merely stood up and walked over to his side of the table. She put her hand out to him, looking down at him, expressing what she felt with her eyes. Anakin hesitated, but only for a moment. He put his hand in hers and stood up.

"You're sure this is what you want?" he asked softly.

She nodded, looking up at him. "Yes, Anakin," she replied. "More than that, it's what I need. I need you, Ani; just as much as you need me."

Anakin nodded, and brought her hand to his mouth to kiss it, his eyes never leaving hers. The touch of his mouth upon her skin was like an electric shock to her system, and she felt her knees grow weak for a moment.

Without saying another word, they left the dining room and went upstairs, closing their bedroom door behind them.

Chapter 44

CHAPTER 44

Padmé's sleep was interrupted in the middle of the night by the sound of Anakin's voice. She woke with a start, and immediately realized that he was having a nightmare. He tossed about on the bed, muttering incoherently. She was sure she heard her name at least once, as well as those of her children. Finally, as his distress seemed to escalate, she moved over to him and shook him in an effort to wake him up.

Anakin awoke suddenly, totally disoriented for a moment. He felt someone's hands upon his arm, and instinctively grabbed them, encircling two slender wrists.

"Ani, wake up!" Padmé said, trying to wrench free from his iron grip.

Anakin opened his eyes and saw the face of his wife above him, and immediately released her. "I'm sorry," he said, "did I hurt you?"

"No," she said, not totally truthfully. "It's okay—you were having a bad dream."

Anakin sat up as his mind started to shake off the fleeting images of the dream. "Yeah, I was," he muttered, running his hands through his short spiky hair.

"Do you remember what it was about?" Padmé asked, caressing his shoulder gently.

Anakin shook his head. "No," he told her. "I don't... maybe that's a good thing, though."

"Yes, I'm sure it is," Padmé replied.

Anakin looked at her. "I'm sorry I woke you up," he said. "It's unusual to have someone to wake up with," he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled too. "Yes, I know what you mean," she said. "I'd almost forgotten how comforting it is sharing a bed with you."

Anakin lay back down and pulled her close. Padmé snuggled up to him, her hand resting on his chest.

"I never dreamed I would have you in my arms like this again, Padmé," he said, kissing the top of her head. 'I'm almost afraid that I will wake up and find that all this has been a wonderful dream.'

Padmé ran her fingers through the hair on his chest. "I know," she replied softly. "I feel the same way."

Anakin closed his eyes, savoring the feelings just having her in his arms elicited; the smell of her hair, the sensation of her skin, the warmth of her body... all reminded him of happier times, before the darkness took him, before the unthinkable happened.

"I'm not looking forward to this...party," Anakin said as he ran his fingers over Padmé's bare shoulder.

"I know," she replied. "But you will have to accept this sort of thing as part of being emperor. I remember feeling the same way when I was queen; so many official receptions, it got tiresome after a while."

"But you're a natural at all this, Padmé," Anakin replied. "You were raised to be a queen; I was just a dirty little slave boy."

Padmé smiled and looked up at him. "You may have started out as a slave, but look at you now. Besides you're forgetting that you are the Chosen One."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, perhaps," he said.

"You don't believe it?" she asked.

Anakin shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "It doesn't seem too likely that the Chosen One would have taken the path that I took. Look what I did to the Jedi..."

She stopped him with a finger placed on his lips. "Don't," she said. "You and I both know all about what happened. Let's not dwell on it, Anakin. Not right now at least."

Anakin took his wife's hand and kissed it. "You're right," He said. "I'm sorry. I will try not to, but you will undoubtedly need to give me a kick in the pants on occasion."

Padmé smiled. "I can manage that," she said as she moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"We're all so relieved that you are safe," Mon Mothma said as she took her seat across from Luke, Leia and Han. Beside her were Admiral Ackbar, and General Reikan.

Leia and Luke felt as though they were facing a firing squad, the tension in the small room was so thick. Mon Mothma, although a soft spoken woman, was not to be taken lightly. She was a formidable leader, a tireless champion of the cause of the Alliance, and a staunch enemy of the Empire and all it represented. When she had called Luke and Leia to this meeting, they both knew that she would be asking some hard questions, questions neither of them quite knew how to answer. There hadn't been time to formulate a plan when they were still on board the *Executor*, and since they had returned, neither of them had been afforded a moment alone to come up with a plan of action. They had asked Han along, knowing he had a quick mind, and was good in tight situations. He was only too happy to help out in any way he could.

"When we received the message from Piett, I knew that there was something wrong," Mothma continued. "Tell us what happened, and please, spare no detail."

"If they think they're going to get away with holding the two of you prisoner for over two weeks, they've got another thing coming," Reikan put in.

"Well, it all began on Bespin," Leia started. "Darth Vader was waiting for Han and me there. He had followed us there, and since the Falcon's hyperdrive was malfunctioning, he had a head start."

"So what did he do?" Reikan asked, leaning forward. "Solo showed up here alone, but you and Luke went AWOL for more than two weeks. What happened?"

Luke and Leia exchanged a brief look. "Well, we tried to get away from Bespin, to return to the fleet," Luke began, leaving out the details of the duel, and the shocking disclosure

Vader had made to them. “But Vader’s ship caught us in a tractor beam, and we were brought on board the flag ship, the *Executor*.”

“So you *were* prisoners, then,” Mon Mothma said, her brow furrowed in a frown.

“Well, yes and no,” Luke said, looking at his sister for help.

“How is that possible?” Ackbar asked at last. ‘Either you were or you weren’t.’
“You weren’t harmed?” Reikan asked.

“No, not at all,” Luke replied.

“Did they ask you for information?” Ackbar asked.

Leia shook her head. “No, they didn’t.”

“So what did they want?” Mon Mothma asked, beginning to grow exasperated. “Surely Darth Vader had a reason for bringing you on board his ship.”

“Well, Vader wasn’t actually the one who brought us on board,” Leia said, thinking through her response carefully. “He was injured, near death in fact. Piett is the one who captured us.”

“Vader was injured?” Ackbar asked. ‘We heard a rumor that he had died, but then it just came out that he is the new emperor. It’s all very confusing, hard to know what to believe.’
“Darth Vader *is* the new emperor,” Luke replied. “That is true. He underwent massive, extensive surgery to repair his injuries. He’s been completely remade.”

“Incredible,” muttered Ackbar to himself. ‘And what about the woman who was with him? He called her Lady Vader. Do you know anything about her?’
“No, nothing,” Leia said, looking down at her hands folded on the table.

Mon Mothma exchanged a glance with her comrades. Clearly something had happened on board Vader’s ship that neither Luke nor Leia were willing to divulge. What could it have been? Why the two of them?

“I don’t understand your reticence in this matter,” Mothma declared. “But it’s obvious to everyone here that the two of you are hiding something. I warn you; if you are withholding vital information...”

“Now wait just a minute,” Han spoke up at last. “What exactly is this little pow wow about? Are you actually accusing the two of them of collaboration with the enemy??”

Mon Mothma shot Han a dirty look. “This doesn’t concern you, Captain Solo,” she said icily. “In fact, I’m not even sure why you’re here.”

“Han is here because we asked him to be here,” Leia said. “And I have to say that he raises a good question. Is that the reason you called Luke and I in here? Because you think we’re in collusion with the Empire??”

“No one here thinks that, Princess,” Reikan said.

“No?” retorted Leia hotly. ‘Sure sounds like it to me.’
“We are simply concerned that you and Luke were missing for so long, and we would like an explanation,” Reikan replied. “I think in our position you would be asking questions as well.”

"I think that both Leia and I have done more than enough to earn the trust of everyone in this room," Luke spoke up at last. "And yet it seems that you don't trust us at all. If there is no trust between allies, how can we ever hope to have peace in the galaxy?"

"You're joking, right?" Reikan said. "Vader is now the emperor, and you expect there to be *peace*?? He's a bloodthirsty murderer, Luke; he won't stop until he crushes the life out of all of us."

"And yet here we are, Luke and I, both alive and well after spending more than two weeks on his ship," Leia countered, surprising even herself with her defense of the dark lord.

"There must be a reason for it," Ackbar asked. "He does not spare the lives of his enemies without a reason."

Mon Mothma sat quietly, listening to all that was said, pondering it all. She had a theory, and she hoped that she was wrong. If she was right, the very future of the Alliance was in question.

"I don't see the point of continuing this any further at this time," she spoke up at last. She examined the faces of both Luke and Leia closely before continuing. "We will leave if for now, and reconvene when cooler heads have prevailed."

Luke couldn't help but be alarmed by Mothma's intense stare. *Does she suspect something?* He wondered anxiously. *Is she starting to piece it together?*

"Good idea," Ackbar said as he stood up. "Let's get a good night's sleep, and perhaps in the morning things will seem clearer."

"Agreed," Reikan said, joining Ackbar. "Goodnight to you," he said, addressing Han, Luke and Leia. He and Ackbar left the room, followed shortly afterwards by Mon Mothma.

Leia turned in her chair to watch them leave and then turned back to her brother. "What are we going to tell them, Luke?" she asked.

Luke shook his head. "I don't know," he said, his eyes still focused on the door where the three rebel leaders had just exited. "But I have a bad feeling that Mon Mothma is starting to put it together."

"What do you mean, kid?" Han asked. "Surely you don't think she suspects the truth about the two of you!"

"I don't know, Han," Luke replied, turning and looking at his friend. "But the way she was looking at me and Leia just now was really strange. She was a senator, wasn't she?"

Leia nodded. "Yes she was," she concurred. "And so was our mother. Is it possible that she...oh no, it can't be..."

"So what if she knew your mom," Han said. "It would be a huge jump of logic to say that you two are her kids."

"You haven't seen our mother, Han," Luke said. "The resemblance between her and Leia is incredible. If Mon Mothma even gets close to putting it together, we are in big trouble, and Father's reign will be a very short one."

"Well we won't let that happen," Leia said, her own fears growing as she considered what Luke was saying. "We can't let her discover the truth."

Luke shook his head. "No, we can't," he agreed. "But how do we prevent it? She has resources at her disposal."

"We just have to make sure she doesn't find out," Han said, standing up. "Even if it means doing a little creative hot wiring," he added with a smile.

Leia looked up at him with a frown. "What are you talking about, Han?"
"Don't worry, sweetheart," he said. "Leave everything to me."

Chapter 45

CHAPTER 45

"Excuse me, your majesty, but Admiral Piett is anxious to speak to you."

Anakin and Padmé looked up from their breakfast to the protocol droid who stood before them.

"I hope everything is alright," Padmé said as she joined Anakin at the computer terminal in the office close by.

"Good morning your majesties," Piett said as he saw Anakin and Padmé appear on the screen. "I trust you are both adjusting well to your new home."

"Yes, so far so good," Anakin replied. "You have news, Piett?"

"Yes," Piett replied. "I received an encoded message from your son. He asked me to relay it to you, since he didn't know how to contact you directly."

Anakin felt Padmé's anxiety level skyrocket as she grasped his hand.

"Thank you, Piett," Anakin replied, "transmit it at once."

"At once," Piett answered. "I look forward to seeing you both tomorrow."

"Yes, of course," Anakin replied, too distracted to think of anything but the message from Luke. Piett's image faded out as the transmission commenced. Anakin and Padmé were both excited and yet apprehensive to see their children appear on the screen.

"Hi Mom, Dad," Luke began. "We hope you get this message okay; sorry we had to go through the *Executor* but we didn't know who else to reach you. We wouldn't have felt it was necessary at all if things hadn't become so messy here."

Anakin and Padmé exchanged a look of alarm as they waited for their children to explain. Soon enough, Leia spoke up.

"You see," she began. "It seems that our absence from the rebel forces has come under the suspicion of the Rebel leaders. They are almost accusing of defecting to the Empire because we are not being completely forthcoming about what happened to us during our absence."

"What??" Anakin blurted out. "That's ridiculous!!"

"Let them finish," Padmé said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"We don't know how to handle this," Luke said. "If we tell them the truth, then we put the two of you in danger. If we don't tell them anything, then they will continue to suspect that we have been up to something and that could land us in the brig."

"One other thing," Leia said. "Mon Mothma is one of the leaders, as you may know. She was a senator when you were, Mother; we think she may suspect that we are your children. Han here has managed to prevent her from nosing around in our personnel files for now. I

won't tell you how he managed that,' she added with a wry smile. "But it's only a matter of time before she can get the system back on line and do some research."

"What do you suggest we do?" Luke asked. "We are sort of stuck between a rock and hard place here. We'd appreciate any advice you can offer. Bye for now— we miss you." Anakin and Padmé watched the transmission fade from the screen in silence. Anakin clenched his fists in frustration.

"What are we going to do?" Padmé said at last.

"I never stopped to think about the position we were placing them in," Anakin said, shaking his head.

"We never should have let them leave. They would have been safer here with us," Padmé added, worry creasing her brow.

"Would they?" Anakin countered. "How would we explain their presence without revealing our true identities?"

Padmé looked at him, realizing that he was right. "Well we have to do something," she said. "We can't let them be condemned for something they are innocent of."

"No," Anakin replied, standing up. "We cannot. He paced about in the office, his hands clasped behind his back. Padmé watched him, her own mind trying to find a solution to the predicament.

"What if we tell the Alliance leaders that I was trying to recruit Luke and Leia to work for me? To defect? Luke's Force abilities are no secret to anyone, nor are Leia's talents as a politician. They would make valuable allies."

Padmé nodded as she started to see where her husband was going with his line of thinking. "Yes, that's brilliant, Ani," she said with a smile. "And they refused your offer, thus proving their allegiance to the Rebel cause."

"Exactly," Anakin replied. "It would explain their presence here, as well as the fact that they were not harmed or interrogated while in my custody. Hopefully that will satisfy their commanders. Imagine, thinking that our children would be disloyal! Their loyalty is without question, above all reproach! I wonder if those idiots who run that collection of riff raff have any idea of how fortunate they are to have Luke and Leia as a part of their cause. I would give anything to have them here with us."

Padmé smiled, touched by Anakin's overt love and pride in their children. "Well, perhaps one day we shall," she said. "Who knows what the future holds?"

Anakin nodded. "True," he said, sitting back down at the comm. station. "I'm going to send word to Luke and Leia," he explained.

First he contacted Piett on board the nearby *Executor* to acquire the frequency on which he had received Luke and Leia's message. Anakin knew that Piett was completely trustworthy, as did his children, or else they would not have chanced sending a message directly to him on board what was technically an enemy vessel. Piett provided the information Anakin needed, and it wasn't long before Anakin and Padmé were sitting face to face with their son.

"It's so good to see you," Padmé said, smiling at her son. "We already miss you both."

“We feel the same way,” Luke told his mother. “Let me contact Leia.” As Anakin and Padmé watched, he activated his comlink and hailed his sister to report to his quarters.

“Piett relayed your message,” Anakin explained. “I’m sorry you were put in this position, son. I can’t believe anyone would question you or your sister’s loyalty.”

Luke shrugged. “Well, I suppose they are just being cautious. Oh, here’s Leia now.”

Leia sat down beside Luke, and behind her Anakin and Padmé could see a man that Anakin recognized as being Han Solo.

“Hello,” Leia said, waving to her parents.

“How are you, Leia?” asked Padmé.

“I’m fine,” she said. She turned to Han. “This is Han Solo,” she said by way of introduction. Han peeked over her shoulders, curious to get a look at the illustrious parents of Luke and Leia.

“Hi,” he said simply with a casual salute.

“Hello Han,” Padmé said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here,” Han said. He looked next at Anakin, and felt strangely nervous about addressing him. ‘Hello, sir,’ Han said. “I want to thank you for helping me out with Jabba. I appreciate it.”

Anakin nodded at him. “You’re welcome,” he replied. “I take it Luke and Leia have told you everything then?”

“Yes, we have,” Leia replied. “We trust Han implicitly.”

“Of course you do,” Padmé said with a smile, recognizing the look in her daughter’s eyes.

“We’ve talked about your situation,” Anakin began, “and have come up with a solution which we hope will alleviate the pressure you two have come under because of this situation. You could tell Mon Mothma and the others that I, that is, Vader, had offered you a place in the Empire, that he was trying to gain you as allies, and that you refused him. Your loyalty to the Rebellion would be beyond question, as far as I can see.”

Luke nodded. “Yes, that sounds like a good plan,” he replied. He turned to his twin. “What do you think, Leia?”

Leia looked thoughtful for a moment as she considered her father’s words. “I suppose they would buy it,” she said at last. “But how do we explain getting away from you? The Darth Vader that they know would never relinquish us so easily.”

“No, you’re right there,” Anakin replied. “Perhaps you could tell them you escaped.”

“On the Falcon?” Leia asked incredulously, to which a disembodied “Hey!” was heard from behind her and Luke.

“Yes, on the Falcon,” Anakin replied with a smile. “She may not look like much, but she’s pretty fast.”

“Thank you,” Han said, leaning forward, for which he received a playful shove.

Padmé laughed. “So that settles it then,” she said. “Leia you mentioned that you suspected Mon Mothma was beginning to piece together you and Luke’s parentage; what makes you think that?”

“Just the way she was looking at us,” Luke replied for his sister. “I just had this... well, this feeling,” he said, not being able to explain it any better than that.

Anakin nodded. “Your feelings are probably correct, Luke,” he said. “In which case, she may very well be able to put it together. Your name is Skywalker, after all.”

“But your marriage was a secret, wasn’t it?” Leia asked. “How would she know that you two even had children together?”

“It would be a long shot, for sure,” Padmé replied. “But Mon Mothma is a resourceful woman, she always has been. I don’t know what else to tell you, except to be careful around her.”

Luke and Leia exchanged a look. “We will,” Luke replied.

“We’d better go,” Leia said. “This frequency is safe for now, but you never know how long it will stay that way.”

“It was good to talk to you both,” Padmé said, smiling at her children. “We miss you both so much.”

“We miss you too, Mother,” Leia replied, looking at her mother, and then she turned her eyes to her father. “Father,” she said.

Anakin smiled, his heart warmed. “May the Force be with you all,” he said.

“May the Force be with you,” Luke replied, and then their images faded from sight.

Anakin turned to his wife, a smile still on his face. “She called me Father,” he said. “Did you hear that?”

Padmé smiled. “Yes, I did,” she said. “I told you she would come around.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, and as usual, you were right.”

Padmé laughed. “Well, you should realize that by now, Ani,” she replied standing up.

“Realize what?” he asked, taking her hand.

“That I’m always right,” she teased, bending down to kiss him.

Anakin laughed. “Ah yes, quite right. Well, let’s see what nonsense is left to be done for this circus tomorrow night,” he said, standing up.

“Such enthusiasm,” Padmé quipped as they left the room.

Anakin laughed again.

“Wow, you really do look like your mom,” Han commented as the three of them sat in Luke’s quarters. ‘And you look like your dad,’ he added looking at Luke. “I still can’t believe that he is, or was, Darth Vader. He’s so young! I always expected Vader to be old for some reason.”

“No, he’s in his early 40’s I’d guess,” Luke replied. “He was very young when he turned to the Dark Side. I don’t know much about it; we haven’t had much of a chance to talk about the past, unfortunately. But he’s changed now, Han. I know that is hard to accept, given the way Vader has terrorized the Rebellion; but he has changed.”

“I could tell when we saw him on Bespin,” Han replied. “When I saw him sitting there I thought, great, I’m history... but then he arranged to have my bounty paid. I couldn’t believe it. Yeah, he’s changed all right. Think knowing you two were alive had something to do with that?”

“Undoubtedly,” Luke replied. “And Mother as well. I had the impression that he had nothing to live for when he believed she had died along with us; but now that he knows the truth, he’s a changed man.”

“Mother has had a lot to do with that,” Leia remarked. “She loves him unwaveringly. It’s incredible the bond between the two of them. I don’t know if he’d have come so far if it weren’t for her. And you too, Luke. You accepted him quite easily as well. I’m still struggling with it.”

“You called him Father, Leia,” Luke pointed out with a smile. “That couldn’t have been easy for you, but I could see how much it meant to him to hear it.”

Leia smiled. “Yes, I saw it too. Well, I can’t deny that he is my father. I’m not exactly thrilled about it, but denying it is just stupid.”

“So you think Mon Mothma is going to buy this?” Han asked.

“I think so,” Leia replied. “It’s a realistic scenario. Well, except for the part about us making a get away on the Falcon,” she had to add with a grin.

Han rolled his eyes. “I can’t win,” he muttered.

Luke and Leia laughed. “Come on,” Luke said as they stood up. “we might as well get this over with.”

Chapter 46

CHAPTER 46

Anakin paced up and down in the grand bedchamber that he shared with his wife. In the Great Hall below the Imperial dignitaries were gathering, preparing to greet their new emperor and his empress.

"Toadies," Anakin muttered as he paced, waiting for his wife to finish the finishing touches to her outfit. "Sycophants," he continued, his sullenness blowing into a full blown mood as his anxiety level rose.

"Imbeciles..."

"Anakin, at least *try* to enjoy yourself this evening," Padmé chastised him as she entered the room from the 'fresher.

"Enjoy myself??" he asked, stopping and looking at her. "You're kidding, right?"

Padmé laughed. "No, actually I'm not," she replied, walking over to him. "I know you hate the hypocrisy of these events, but you need to get used to them if you are going to be the emperor."

"I know, I know," Anakin said as Padmé stood before him. "I'm just not anticipating this being a particularly cordial affair."

"Well, perhaps not all of it," she agreed, "but you have to do what you must, Ani. You're the emperor now; you have to make the hard decisions."

"That's not what I have a problem with," he replied. "It's the hypocrisy of it all, the sickening pandering of these idiots that I am forced to endure. I've always hated it."

Padmé sighed. "Yes, I know," she said, brushing imaginary lint off of his ebony cloak. "But this won't be forever, Ani. And in the long run, won't our efforts be worth it? If we can accomplish what we are hoping to?"

"Yes, of course, you're right," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. 'As always.' He pulled her face to his and kissed her softly on the mouth. "What would I do without you here to keep me from going mad?"

Padmé smiled up at him. "Let's hope you never have to find out," she said, adjusting her veil. "Now let's get you ready, Anakin. Your subjects await you."

As he had expected, Anakin spent the next two hours being fawned over by his only too eager to please subjects. He was grateful for the deep hood, for it allowed him to roll his eyes at will. And he did so, frequently. As the right hand of the late emperor, Darth Vader had been forced to endure the occasional social event; but he avoided them ferociously. Now, he realized that this was no longer an option. Besides, he reasoned, this reign will be a short one if our plans go as we hope. The thought of this and of retreating to a life of peaceful

anonymity appealed to Anakin tremendously; and it was what enabled him to endure the overt pandering of the Imperial elite.

Padmé did not leave his side, and for this Anakin was most grateful. Her presence was like a balm upon his frazzled nerves, and she helped him keep the beasts at bay. *What would I do without her?* He wondered as he watched her speak to the Imperial delegates with the same charm and grace that had always been her trademarks. *In Darkness... as I was for 22 years without her.* Anakin smiled, tuning the rest of the room out for a moment, and simply basking in her soothing aura.

“My Lord, everything is prepared.”

Anakin looked away from Padmé to see Piett standing at his side.

“Very good,” he replied. “We shall commence at once.”

Padmé had heard Piett’s announcement, and turned to her husband. “Are you ready for this?” she asked quietly.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, it is time.” He took her hand and left the room with her, ascending the great stair case.

“You are telling us that Darth Vader invited you to join the Empire??” General Reikan asked incredulously.

“Yes, that’s right,” Leia replied. “Luke is a practically a Jedi, and I’ve been a senator since I was a girl. He sees that we both have strengths he can exploit. Why is that so surprising?”

“Well, I don’t suppose it is,” sputtered Reikan. ‘But it just seems so... so unlike him. He doesn’t gather allies, he merely crushes his enemies.’

“I take it you declined his generous offer,” Mon Mothma asked.

Luke and Leia looked at her, unsettled by her icy stare and the tone of her voice. Luke had not been able to shake the uneasy feeling she had given him at their last meeting; indeed, it only seemed to be getting worse.

“What do *you* think?” Leia retorted angrily. ‘We’re here aren’t we?? Why would we even entertain such a thing?’

“Forgive me for saying so,” Luke said calmly, addressing the former senator, “but it sounds to me like you are questioning our loyalty to the Alliance.”

“No one is doing that, Commander Skywalker,” Ackbar spoke up. “This situation is just very strange, and we need to understand fully what happened while you were on board the flag ship.”

“We’ve told you,” Leia snapped irritably. “I don’t know what else you want from us.”

“You could start by telling us why an encoded message from Commander Skywalker’s quarters was sent to the very flag ship you supposedly escaped from,” Mon Mothma returned.

Luke and Leia sat in stunned silence; both of them feeling themselves fill with anxiety. *How did she know?? It was a secure channel...*

"I can see by your reaction that you have no explanation," Mothma continued. "Very well. Until such time as you do, you will be considered suspects of espionage."
"You can't be serious!!" Luke cried.

"I am very serious," Mon Mothma replied angrily. "Who do you take us for, fools?? First you disappear for more than two weeks, and then when you return, you offer some flimsy excuse for your absence. Next, you tell us that you were offered an alliance with Darth Vader, the most reviled and venomous enemy of the Alliance. And now we discover that you have been communicating with his ship! No doubt with Vader himself!! Put yourself in my shoes; what conclusions *you* draw?"

Neither Luke nor Leia knew how to respond. A thousand thoughts ran through their minds, as they desperately tried to think of a reasonable explanation. *Do we tell them the truth?* Leia asked her brother silently. Luke hesitated, not knowing what to say. *No...* he answered at last. *You know what would happen if we did that.* Leia knew, all too well. Not only would it destroy their parents' chances of setting the galaxy right, but it would also place their lives in danger. The truth was not an option.

"Fine," said Mothma standing up at last. "Since you can offer no explanation, I am placing you both under arrest until such time as you can."

"This is an outrage!" Leia cried as two security guards came forth to escort her and Luke out to the room. "You are making a huge mistake, Mothma. Huge!!"

Mon Mothma merely watched as the two were taken out of the room. She turned to her colleagues after the doors closed behind them.

"You'd better be right about this," Reikan told her. "I would hate to have the two of them as enemies."

Mon Mothma raised one auburn eyebrow. "Oh, I believe we are well past that point, General. They already are our enemies."

Han Solo was not invited to the meeting in Mon Mothma's office, for which he was rather irritated; but he was waiting in the corridor outside as it proceeded, leaning up against the wall, his arms crossed in front of him. He was worried; he knew that Mon Mothma was a no nonsense sort of person who brooked no hint of duplicity from any one under her command. When the doors opened and he saw Luke and Leia being escorted from the office like two common criminals, he realized that his worst fears had come to fruition.

"What the hell is going on??" he demanded of the guards.

"We are escorting the prisoners to the brig," announced one of the guards. "Under orders of Mon Mothma."

"Like hell you are!" Han growled, reaching for his blaster.

"Han, don't," Luke said. "That will only land you in trouble."

"I'm not going to let them do this to you two," Han countered, walking along side them as the guards escorted them down the corridor. "This is bullshit!"

"It is, but we are in no position to change things, are we?" asked Leia.

Han knew what she referred to; their parents' plans hinged on keeping their true identities a secret. If it were known that Luke and Leia were in fact the children of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala, then everything would come unraveled. It was a no win situation.

"You may not be," Han countered, "but I bloody well am."

"Han, don't be foolish," Leia chided him, secretly loving him for his protectiveness.

"Yes, Han," Luke said, knowing that they mustn't say anything incriminating in front of the guards. "It's not like you're a Jedi, after all."

Han frowned, stung by Luke's words. "Hey," he said, the hurt evident in his voice. "Just because I don't follow that hokey religion doesn't mean that I'm...." He stopped as the true message behind Luke's words hit him.

"You're right," he called after Luke and Leia as they were lead away. 'I'm no Jedi.' He waited until they were out of ear shot. "But I know some one who is," he said to himself as a plan formulated in his mind. He took off running in the opposite direction, in search of his copilot, Chewbacca. He was going to need his help.

Chapter 47

CHAPTER 47

"Delegates from the far reaches of the Empire, I have an announcement to make," Anakin said as the room below him became silent. He was standing with Padmé on the small balcony outside of their bedroom, overlooking the great hall.

"Although I have assumed the seat of the emperor, you will find that I am nothing like my predecessor. The late emperor was content to allow the planets in this Empire to be subjected to the exploitation of the regional governors. Palpatine did not care, so long as order was kept. I am not Palpatine. During my years as his apprentice I saw a tremendous amount of abuse of power by these governors, who were more interested in lining their own pockets than seeing to the well being of the people in their systems. This will stop effective immediately."

There were murmurs of surprise and disbelief from below as the intentions of the new emperor became clear.

"The regional governors will be removed from their positions," Anakin continued, enjoying the shock he sensed from the congregation below. "And it is my command that within one year the planets that have been enslaved by the tyrannical grasp of exploitation create their own governments."

The murmurings grew louder, as disbelief started to turn to outrage. *Was Vader mad??*

"It will be the job of the former governors to assist the planets in the formation of a government, to ensure that they are self-governing within one standard year," Anakin continued. "The Empress Vader will directly supervise this endeavor, as well as creating a new Imperial Senate, which she shall personally oversee."

"This is outrageous!" A voice from the crowd exclaimed. "It will never work!"

Anakin searched the crowd for the dissenter. A deathly quiet had fallen over the assembled dignitaries. *Orrick...* he realized as he zeroed in on the source of the voice.

"You have an objection, Governor Orrick?" Anakin asked, trying to keep his anger in check. Padmé could hear the edge in his voice, and feared the worst. She reached over and put her hand over his on the railing in an attempt to keep him calm.

Orrick had not intended for his remark to be so loud, and looked up at Anakin nervously. "Uh... well... not entirely, your majesty," he stammered.

"No?" Anakin returned. "It sounds to me like you do. Unless you are denying that is was you who shouted out that incendiary comment?"

"Well... uh... no my lord... I mean... your majesty..." Orrick stammered.

"So you are admitting to questioning me," Anakin replied, his voice a deadly calm.

"No! Of course not, it's just that..." Orrick's words were cut short as his throat became constricted. His eyes bulged as he grasped at his throat desperately, while those around him looked on in horror.

"Anakin, stop it," Padmé said quietly, squeezing his hand.

Anakin turned to her. "I have to make an example of him, Padmé," he replied in a voice that frightened her in its coldness. "I cannot allow this sort of dissention to go unchecked."

Padmé shook her head. "That is the way of the Dark Side," she told him, her dark eyes full of anguish. "Don't do this!! You're better than this!"

Down below Orrick fell to his knees as Anakin turned back to him, struggling with the demons that raged through him. *She's right... this is not the way to deal with this... but how can I allow this to go unpunished?*

Anakin looked back when he felt Padmé yank her hand from his and leave the balcony. He turned back and released the man. Orrick collapsed to the floor, his face blue. Anakin watched as he fell to the floor, dead. Anakin felt horrible, guilt and remorse overwhelming him as he gripped the railing tightly. *Will I ever eradicate the darkness completely? Will it possess me for the rest of my life?*

Finally he spoke, knowing that he mustn't show his underlings his remorse. *I must not show any sign of conflict... Darth Vader would never show remorse for killing a man, no matter how undeserving his death may be...*

"If there are no other...comments," he began, his voice strong and commanding. "Then our summit is concluded. Leave my home now."

He turned and left the balcony, closing the doors behind him. Padmé was sitting on the edge of their bed, staring straight before her.

"Padmé, I didn't mean it to go that far," Anakin said as he approached her.

She looked up at him, seeing that he was remorseful, but not able to forget the sound of his voice when he pronounced the man's guilt.

"I know," she said, trying to be gentle, trying to understand. 'But you can't control these impulses, Ani,' she said to him. "Not yet. If you want me to help you get past this, then you need to listen to me."

Anakin sat down on the bed beside her, leaning forward to rest his face in his hands.

"I'm trying, Padmé," he replied quietly. "It's not easy to be in this position; I'm doing the best I can."

"I know you are," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "I know how difficult this is. You didn't turn to the Dark Side over night; your journey back to the light will not happen over night either. But you are nearly there, Ani. Please don't give up, please don't let the Darkness win."

Anakin sat up and turned to his wife. He knew she was the reason that he managed to fight the Darkness at all, she and their children. It was his love for them that kept him from sliding back into the abyss.

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching out a hand to stroke her face. "I am fighting with everything within me to resist the darkness. Having you with me is the best chance I have."

Padmé felt the tears welling up within her. She had seen him lose the fight once before; how could she stand to face it again?? *I won't ..I won't allow him to lose this time.*

"I'm not going anywhere," she told him, turning to him. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep you here with me, Anakin. I'm not going to lose you again."

Anakin smiled, cupping her cheek in his hand. "Thank you, my love," he said softly. "I would be lost without you. I..." he stopped, as a terrible sense of dread filled him. Padmé grew alarmed.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Luke and Leia," he said slowly. "They are in trouble... I can feel their fear, Padmé... something has happened."

"What are we going to do?" Padmé asked, not doubting for a moment that Anakin's senses were deadly accurate.

Anakin shook his head, trying to reach out to his children with the Force. *I won't let anything happen to you, I promise.*

"Do you know where they are?" Padmé asked him.

"Not yet," Anakin said, standing up. "But I intend to find out."

Chapter 48

CHAPTER 48

Luke and Leia sat in a detention cell, a heavy silence having settled between them. Luke was well aware that he could break them out, even his rudimentary Jedi skills were no match for the guards posted outside of their cell. Yet, he also realized that escape would only incriminate them further in the eyes of the Rebel leaders.

“Father will help us, Leia,” Luke said to his sister. ‘He knows we’re in trouble.’ “How do you know that?” she asked.

“Father speaks to me, Leia,” Luke explained. “He would speak to you too if you allowed him into your mind.”

Leia looked away, not wanting to get into another argument with Luke. She was too scared, too worried about what would happen to them. “Maybe we should just tell them the truth,” she said.

Luke shook his head. “Have some faith,” he said. “Father won’t let us go through this.”

“What do you think he’s going to do, Luke?” she challenged. “Come here and ask that we be released? Negotiate for our release? You think they are going to just hand us over to him?”

“I don’t know,” Luke admitted.

“No, of course not,” she said. “And if they don’t what will he do? What does Darth Vader do when he doesn’t get his way?”

“He is *not* Darth Vader,” Luke replied adamantly. “Why can’t you just accept that? Why won’t you admit that he has changed?”

“I admit it, openly,” she replied. “But he has not changed enough to prevent him from doing something violent and ruthless. You heard about what happened at the press conference. Someone said something he didn’t like, and he reacted violently. Those are not the actions of a redeemed man.”

Luke frowned, hating to admit that she may indeed have a point. “What do you want me to say, Leia?” he asked tiredly.

“I want you to be realistic, Luke,” she replied. “That’s all. You are too easily convinced of his goodness, and it has blinded you to the fact that he is, in some way, still Darth Vader. Yes, he has changed; but there still remains a lot of Vader in him, and you know it was well as I do. If he finds out what has happened, he will kill whoever stands between him and us.”

A chill ran down Luke’s spine as he considered Leia’s words. *She’s right... he will kill anyone who harms us.*

“Han is on his way to Coruscant right now,” Luke reminded her. “He will know what to do. He’s not going to allow people to be killed.”

Leia raised one eyebrow. "And what do you think he can do to prevent it?"

Luke did not want to think about it, for the more he did, the more uneasy he became. It seemed that there was no easy way out, no matter which way you looked at it.

Anakin and Padmé had spent half the night combing through the Imperial Intelligence Network, searching for the last known whereabouts of the Rebel base. The transmission that Luke had sent was untraceable; but there had been some reports that they were investigating.

"This is getting us no where," Anakin grumbled as he commenced his trademark pacing.

"What else can we do?" Padmé asked, looking up from the computer terminal.

Anakin shook his head, his frustration level rising with each minute that passed. "May the Force protect those Rebels if something happens to Luke and Leia," he growled. "We never should have let them leave; Padmé...none of this would have happened if we had kept them here with us where they belong. If something happens to them, I will never forgive myself, and as for those Rebel commanders..."

A knock on the door interrupted his ranting. Anakin strode over to the door opened it.

"Excuse me, your majesty," the protocol droid said. "But there is a man here who insists upon seeing you."

Anakin frowned. "Who is he? What does he want?"

"He says he is a family friend," the droid replied. "Han Solo."

Anakin's eyes opened wide. "Did you say Han Solo??"

"Affirmative, your majesty," the droid began but didn't get the words out before Anakin and Padmé rushed past it and headed for the stairs.

Han walked around in the great hallway, looking up at the high ceiling and elegance of the emperor's residence. He still could not get over the fact that Luke and Leia's parents were now the emperor and empress of the Galactic Empire. He was more than a little intimidated by this, for he felt certain that he would never measure up in their eyes a suitor for their daughter. Now that he and Leia had admitted to each other the depth of their feelings, he had begun to consider a future with her; until now. *What can I possibly do to impress the emperor??*

"Captain Solo?"

Han looked over to the staircase to see a man and a woman standing at the foot of the stairs. He recognized them as Luke and Leia's parents.

"That's me," Han said, not really knowing what else to say. Seeing Anakin Skywalker in person was more than a little intimidating. He was huge, for one thing. Han had always assumed that Vader was as large as he was because of the bulky armor; now he saw that clearly that was not the case. But it wasn't the man's imposing physical presence that was the most daunting, but the intensity of his cerulean eyes.

"You have news of our children?" The empress asked, her soulful brown eyes reminding Han so much of Leia's.

Han nodded. "Yeah, I do. Mon Mothma has thrown them into the brig."

Anakin frowned. "The brig??" he cried. "What is the charge against them?"

"Espionage," Han replied.

Padmé and Anakin exchanged a look.

"You mean to say that the rebel leaders think our children are traitors to the Alliance?" Padmé asked in indignation.

Han nodded. "Yes m'am, I'm afraid so," he replied. "They weren't able to explain why they were gone for so long, and Mon Mothma suspects that they were lying about everything. Plus she found out that Luke had been in contact with the *Executor*," he added. "That was sort of the last straw."

Anakin's frown deepened. "You must take me to them," he said. "I won't allow this travesty to continue."

"Wait a minute," Padmé said. "You're not going without *me*, Anakin," she said.

Han was amused by how much like her daughter the empress looked at that moment, standing toe to toe with her giant of a husband, not intimidated in the least by the look in eyes.

"This will be dangerous," Anakin told his wife. "I won't stand for you being placed in a harm's way, Padmé."

"Luke and Leia are my children too," she said in reply. "Do you think I want to sit here and wait for word while you're half way across the galaxy? I'm coming with you!"

Anakin shook his head and exhaled loudly. He turned to Han. "Where are they?" he asked.

"The command ship," Han replied. "Sullust system."

Anakin nodded. "Where is your ship?"

"Follow me."

Chapter 49

CHAPTER 49

Anakin and Padmé changed their clothing, donning simple, inconspicuous trousers, tunics and boots, for the journey. Stealing through the darkness of the Coruscant night, they made their way to Han's ship, which he had left at a landing platform not far from the emperor's property.

"So this is the Millennium Falcon," Anakin said as they reached the infamous freighter. "*This* is the ship that evaded the Empire on a regular basis?" he asked incredulously looking at the worn looking ship which seemed to a collection of mismatched pieces bolted together in an utterly random fashion.

Han bridled under the implication. "I know she don't look like much," he replied, "but she's the fastest ship in the rebel fleet," he added proudly.

Anakin cocked an eyebrow, keeping his comment to himself at this pronouncement. Padmé gave him an amused look, grateful that he had the good grace to keep his opinion to himself just this once.

Once on board, they met Han's copilot, an enormous wookiee named Chewbacca.

"Okay, let's get out of here, Chewie," Han said as he took his seat. 'You might want to sit in the back,' he added, addressing his comment to Anakin and Padmé. "It's a little more comfortable back there."

"This is fine, Han," Padmé said, sitting down behind Chewbacca. Anakin sat beside her, feeling strange not to be in the pilot's seat. He looked at the controls, his hands itching to take them.

"Strap yourselves in," Han said. "We have clearance to take off."

Anakin looked over at Padmé. He hadn't figured out what he would say or do to free their children, yet; but that would come to him, of that he felt certain.

"We should be at the Sullust system about 1200 hours," Han announced as they made the jump to hyperspace. "You might as well make yourselves comfortable."

Anakin stood up. "I'm going to stretch my legs," he said. He had noticed that Padmé was having difficulty staying awake. 'Come along, angel,' he said, holding his hand out to her. "You could use some sleep."

Padmé did not try to deny his observation, and stood up, putting her hand in his.

They made their way to the hold and sat down on a small cot.

"Now, lie down," Anakin told her, patting his lap.

"But aren't you tired too?" she asked.

“No,” he replied. “I know I wouldn’t get a wink of sleep anyway. You go ahead.”

Padmé didn’t object, and lay down on the cot, using Anakin’s lap as her pillow. Within a few moments she drifted off to sleep, as Anakin massaged her back to help her relax. His mind was far too active to sleep, and as he sat there, he tried to formulate a plan.

Clearly he could not reveal that he was the emperor; that would blow his whole scheme out of the water. No, they would have to simply introduce themselves as Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala, the parents of Luke and Leia. Yet, surely there were some who would recognize them both. *Would that be a problem? Would they be able to piece together who I have been for the past 22 years?*

“So what’s the plan?”

Anakin looked up to see Han enter the hold.

“Get back my children,” Anakin replied. “By whatever means necessary.”

Han nodded his understanding as he sat down. “Are you sure that’s such a good idea?” he asked.

Anakin frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, that sounds more like an approach I’d expect from Darth Vader,” Han replied. “Not Anakin Skywalker.”

Anakin fought back the urge to lash out at the young pilot, but managed to control his ire. After all, he was right.

“So who are you, then?” Han asked when Anakin made no reply. “Are you Darth Vader or Anakin Skywalker? Leia seems to think you’re neither, with elements of both. I don’t understand how that’s possible, but I suppose that’s because I don’t get all that Force business.”

Anakin smiled, amused by Han’s candor. “I suppose she’s right,” he replied at last. ‘But have no fear, Captain Solo,’ he added. “I have no intention of wrecking havoc on the Rebel base.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Han said. “Cause it wouldn’t do much to endear you to your kids I would guess.”

“No, I’m sure it wouldn’t,” Anakin replied. “I don’t suppose *you* have any ideas?”

Han rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I’m pretty good at getting out of sticky situations,” he said.

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” Anakin returned wryly.

“Yeah, I’m sure you have,” Han replied. ‘I don’t think you should tell them you’re the emperor,’ he began. “I think you need to try to negotiate with them, rather than throw your weight around.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I agree. But will they be willing to negotiate? The question of my children’s loyalty will still be at hand.”

“Yeah, I know,” Han replied. “What if you had an explanation for why they were gone? One that was connected to you in some way?”

Anakin considered this. The reason they were gone *was* connected to them; but he knew what Han meant. Somehow Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala needed to be intrinsically involved in this. But how?

“As weird as it might be to say it, maybe you could claim to be prisoners of Vader, you and your wife,” Han suggested. “As a Jedi knight wouldn’t you be an enemy of the Empire?”

“Yes indeed,” Anakin replied reflectively. “I suppose we could tell them the truth, at least part of it.”

“Which part would that be?”

“About how Palpatine held Padmé, Luke and Leia prisoner and I killed him in order to save them,” he replied. “That much is true.”

Han nodded. “Yeah, that’s true,” he conceded. “But what about Vader? How does he fit into all this? And why were you on the *Executor*?”

“I don’t know,” Anakin muttered, shaking his head. This was getting so complicated, and one thing he knew from experience, the more complicated the lies became, the easier it was to mess everything up.

“Maybe the fact that you saved them will be enough,” suggested Han.

“Perhaps,” Anakin replied, not convinced. He highly suspected that the *negotiations* would be the aggressive kind.

“Things will fall into place,” he said at last, looking down at his sleeping wife. “They usually do.”

Han nodded. “So what happened to cause this change of heart?” he asked.

Anakin looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” Han replied. “The transformation from Darth Vader back to Anakin Skywalker. What made you do it?”

“I finally came to the realization that the emperor had been using me all my life,” Anakin replied. “And that he had lied to me about everything, including the death of my wife, my children, and my own injuries.”

“And what made you realize that all of a sudden?” Han asked.

“I found Luke,” Anakin replied simply. “When the Death Star was destroyed, I had spies find out the name of the rebel who was responsible. When I found out that it was Luke Skywalker, I realized that he had to be my son.”

“And Leia?” Han asked. “I’m assuming you didn’t know she was your kid when you tortured her on the Death Star.”

Anakin scowled at the question. “Obviously not,” he replied. ‘I’d give anything to return to that day,’ Anakin continued, speaking more to himself than to Han. “Anything. But there is

nothing I can do to change the past. All I can do is atone for what I have done and hope that, someday, my daughter forgives me.”

“She’s confused right now,” he observed. “At least that’s the impression I get. I think she wants to forgive you, wants to have the relationship that Luke has with you, but is too damn stubborn to get there. You know what I mean?”

Anakin nodded. “I do indeed. Stubbornness is something she and I seem to have in common.”

Han smiled. “Well I knew it had to come from somewhere.”

“I... appreciate your help, Solo,” Anakin said. “I’m grateful for what you have done to help me.”

“Well, I kinda figured I owed you one for what you did to help me out with Jabba,” Han replied. “Besides, your kids are my best friends. I wasn’t about to let them rot in the brig.”

Anakin nodded. “They choose their friends well,” he observed.

Han shrugged, uncomfortable with the all too unfamiliar praise. “Yeah, well, I’ll just be glad when they’re free. Assuming we’re able to pull this off, what happens next? Will you take them back to Coruscant?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead yet, to tell you the truth,” Anakin replied. “I’m still working on how I’m going to get them out of the brig.”

Han laughed. “We seem to have a lot in common,” he commented.

“I never look past the end of my nose either.”

Anakin smiled. “Well you know what they say about the best laid plans.”

Han nodded. “Yep, I sure do.” The sound of the sublight engines was heard. ‘Looks like we’re coming up on the Sullust system,’ he said, standing up. “I guess it’s show time.”

“Yes, it does indeed,” Anakin replied, looking down at his still sleeping wife. He hated to disturb her peaceful slumber, but realized he had no choice. Gently he shook her shoulder, kissing her cheek lightly. Padmé’s eyes fluttered open. She was disoriented for a moment, and then looked up at Anakin.

“Are we there?” she asked sleepily.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, we’ve just made the reversion from hyperspace,” he told her.

Padmé sat up, feeling knots of anxiety in her stomach. “I’m scared, Ani,” she said softly.

Anakin put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “So am I,” he admitted. “But we have to be strong, Padmé. For Luke and Leia’s sake.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said. “For them I can do anything.”

Anakin smiled. “Come on,” he said, standing up and taking her hand. “Time to get our children back.”

Chapter 50

CHAPTER 50

Han and Chewbacca directed the *Falcon* to the command ship where they docked the freighter.

Anakin felt strange as he walked through the command ship with his wife, lead by Han and his copilot. He spent half of his life trying to find the Rebels, hunting them down across the galaxy; and now here he was on the command ship. One year ago this scenario wouldn't have seemed possible. But of course, one year ago he didn't know that he had a family. *That changed everything...*

"It looks like Mon Mothma is in the command centre right now," Han said after consulting the ship's intelligence system. "Are you ready?"

Anakin looked at Padmé. "Yes, I think we are."

"Then follow me," Han replied. "This way."

Mon Mothma sat at her computer terminal, poring over the records of Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa. There was nothing in the records of either that would indicate a predilection to treason; both had shown exemplary service, their loyalty unquestionable. So what had caused them to consider such treachery? Mon Mothma stared at the images of both individuals, something at the back of her mind nagging at her, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. There was a familiarity to them, and it bothered her that she was unable to place them. *Skywalker... could he possibly be related to Anakin Skywalker?* No, that wasn't possible; he was a Jedi, and the Jedi were not permitted to marry. Coincidence? The young man had demonstrated unusual abilities that were much like those used by the legendary Jedi. The more she thought of it, the more puzzled she became. And what of Leia Organa? Why were the two of them in league all of a sudden? There had to be a connection somehow, and she was determined to find out what it was.

Mon Mothma's musings were interrupted by the door chime. She looked up from the screen. "Come in," she said. The door opened.

"Ah, Captain Solo," she said, returning her attention to the screen in front of her. "I'm sure you'll be thrilled to know that my computer is working again. I don't suppose *you* know anything about the unfortunate break down it had yesterday?"

"Uh, Mon Mothma," Han said, realizing that she hadn't noticed his companion. "There's someone here you need to talk to."

"Oh?" she asked, looking up. She did a double take when she saw who it was. "Anakin Skywalker?"

Anakin merely nodded, doing his best to control the anger he felt directed at the woman.

“Padme Amidala?” Mon Mothma asked next, looking at Anakin’s companion. “Is it really you?”

Padmé nodded, wishing she could summon up some happiness at seeing the woman who had once been a friend. Considering how her children had been treated by Mon Mothma, it was difficult for her to hide her hostility.

“Mon Mothma,” Padmé replied. “It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it has,” Mon Mothma agreed. ‘I... I though you’d died! I saw the footage of your funeral on the holonet! And Anakin,’ she said, turning back to Anakin. “I assumed you had perished in the Jedi purges. What is this all about? Where have you been all these years?”

“We were forced to go into hiding,” Padmé said. “And have been living in the Outer Rim for the past 22 years. But that isn’t the reason we’re here, to return to public life. We’ve come because of our children.”

“Your children??” Mon Mothma asked, completely perplexed. “What are you talking about? You two have children together?? What children?”

“Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa,” Anakin said at this point. “Your prisoners. They are our children.”

Mon Mothma sat down, completely astonished by the revelation. She had no idea that Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala were married, let alone that they’d had children together. What was the reason for all the secrecy?

“I have to admit that I am completely baffled by all of this,” Mon Mothma said at last.

“That is your problem, the way I see it,” Anakin replied coldly. “We aren’t here to explain our private lives to you, only to retrieve our children whom you have been persecuting.”

Mon Mothma frowned, not liking the tone that Anakin’s voice had assumed. “Your children are prisoners of the Alliance,” she replied, her tone matching Anakin’s in its iciness. “They have been caught in the act of communicating with the enemy, namely, the flagship of the Empire.”

“Yes, we know that,” Padmé replied calmly. “They were communicating with us.”

“With you?” Mon Mothma replied. “What were you doing on board Darth Vader’s ship?? Unless you have joined the Empire yourselves.”

It was Padmé’s turn to grow angry. “I resent that implication,” she returned. ‘We were held prisoner on that ship,’ she said, thinking fast. “Our children were trying to free us.”

“That’s right,” Anakin said, picking up the story. “My wife and children were being held prisoner by the emperor. I came to their aid, killing the emperor in the process. For that I was imprisoned on board the *Executor*, along with my family.”

Mon Mothma listened, growing more astonished by the moment. “So how did you escape?” she asked pointedly.

“My husband is a Jedi,” Padmé said, looking at Anakin. “Surely you know what that means.”

Mon Mothma nodded. "Yes, I suppose so," she replied. "So you're telling me that Luke and Leia escaped, and then communicated with you? How could they send a message to you if you were prisoners?"

Anakin and Padmé looked at one another, a sense of unease growing in them. *Now what?*

"That isn't your concern," Anakin said at last, deciding that he'd had enough. He waved his hand in front of her, manipulating her mind with the Force. "You *will* relinquish Luke and Leia into my custody, no questions asked."

Mon Mothma stared at him vacantly for a moment. "The guard will release them to your custody," she said at last.

Anakin smiled. "Very good," he replied.

He and Padmé turned to leave. *That was too easy*, Anakin reflected, his sense of alarm not relaxing. *We're not out of this yet.*

Han lead Anakin and Padme to the brig, where a single guard stood outside the door.

"Captain Solo," the guard said. "What are you doing here?"

"Mon Mothma has ordered Luke and Leia be released to me," he said.

The guard frowned, not sure he ought to believe the Corellian. He was well aware of the friendship between Solo and the two prisoners.

"I'll need verification of that order, you realize," the guard replied.

"Of course," Han said confidently. "Contact her yourself."

"I'll do that," he said. "Wait right here."

The guard walked over to the comm. on the wall down the corridor.

"This is ridiculous," Padmé muttered.

Anakin did not reply, for he was watching the guard closely. He had a sinking feeling that the ruse was up. "Get ready to run," he told Padmé and Han. "This isn't going as planned."

"What do you mean?" Padmé asked.

"I'll cover for you," Han said, drawing his blaster, realizing what Anakin was planning.

Using the Force, Anakin pushed the door aside, where inside his twins looked up in astonishment.

"Father?" Luke asked, standing up. "What are you doing here?"

"No time to explain," Anakin said. "Come with me, both of you. Fast!"

Luke and Leia rushed out the door, where Han was waiting with Padmé.

"Let's beat it," Han said, running down the hall as the guard started the pursuit after them.

Anakin turned and Force pushed the man, sending him flying down the hall.

"This way," Han instructed as they rounded the corner, heading for the hangar.

Soon the sound of blaster fire was heard behind them, and they realized that they were being pursued.

"We can't hold them off forever!" Han shouted. Anakin used his lightsaber to deflect the blaster fire as Han shot into the crowd of guards who had been dispatched to stop them.

"Go!" Anakin shouted at Han, knowing that they were close to the Falcon. "I can handle this!"

Han looked quickly at Anakin, amazed at the speed and accuracy with which he deflected the laser bolts. *Handy guy to have in a tight spot*, he reflected.

"Do it, Solo!" Anakin ordered his tone carrying authority. "Get my family to safety!"

Han decided he would do as he was told, for a change, and escorted Padme and her children to the Falcon, leaving Anakin to dispatch the remainder of the guards.

"Where is Anakin??" Padme cried looking around frantically as they boarded the Falcon.

"He's coming," Han said. "He told me to get you on board safely. He looks like he can handle things pretty well."

"He can," Luke said. "But he's outnumbered..." he stopped as they heard the sound of boots upon the ramp.

"He's made it," Padme sighed with relief.

"Okay Chewie, let's hit it," Han said as he ran to the cockpit.

Padme, Luke and Leia sat down, strapping themselves in as they waited for Anakin to appear.

Luke felt a sense of unease as they sat, the wait seeming unnaturally long. "Something's not right," he said, unstrapping himself. He ran out of the hold and into the short hallway that lead the hold to the boarding ramp. "Father!!" he cried when he saw his father collapsed on the floor, a puddle of blood forming under him.

Luke rushed to his father's side. "No!!" he cried, taking his father by the shoulders. "Father, can you hear me?? Father!!"

Padme and Leia came running when they heard Luke's desperate cry.

"Ani!!" Padme screamed when she saw the prone figure of her husband on the floor. "What happened?"

"I think he was shot," Luke said. 'He's bleeding, Mother,' he added, looking up at Padme, "he needs medical attention immediately."

Padme nodded, the tears blurring her vision. "Let's get him into the hold."

The three of them managed, with considerable difficulty, to carry the dead weight of Anakin's unconscious body into the hold and laid him down on the cot.

"I'm going to tell Han what happened," Luke said, running off to the cockpit.

Padme sat at Anakin's side, taking his hand, her body paralyzed with fear. Leia stood behind her, her arms folded tightly over her chest. She stared at her father's face, unable to deny the feelings that she could feel churning within her. *Hold on, Father...I can't lose you now.* Padme looked up at her daughter in surprise; almost as though she could read her daughter's thoughts.

"He'll be okay, Leia," Padme said through her tears. "He has to be."

Leia could only nod in response, as her own tears slid down her cheeks, surprising her utterly.

"Hold on Ani," Padme said softly. "Please, hold on. I can't bear to lose you again."

Chapter 51

CHAPTER 51

“What do you mean, they got away??” Mon Mothma cried angrily. “You outnumbered them!”

“I’m sorry,” the leader of the security squadron replied. “But one of them was a Jedi. He deflected all of our blasts with his red laser sword.”

“It’s called a *lightsaber*,” Mon Mothma returned sharply. And then she thought about what he had said. “Did you say red??”

The security officer nodded.

“Are you sure??” Mon Mothma asked.

“Absolutely certain,” the officer replied. “You can look at the security holos if you don’t believe me.”

“He’s right, Mon,” General Dodonna called from across the room. He sat at computer screen watching the security footage of the incident earlier. “It was a red lightsaber that Skywalker used.”

Mon Mothma frowned. “But the Jedi don’t use red lightsabers,” she stated. “They never did. In fact,” she continued, “there’s only one person I’ve ever seen using a red lightsaber: Darth Vader.”

“Darth Vader??” Dodonna replied. “So what is it that you’re saying, Mon? You think he took Vader’s saber?”

“No, I think he *is* Darth Vader,” Mon Mothma replied as the pieces started to fall into place. “Now it all makes sense. No one has seen or heard from Anakin Skywalker in 22 years, and now, all of a sudden, he’s back. Coincidentally, when Skywalker disappeared, Darth Vader appeared on the scene. Isn’t that an awfully big coincidence?”

Dodonna’s eyes widen as he begins to follow her line of thinking. “And Luke and Leia... when they were on board the *Executor* it was because Vader was there and Vader is their father!”

Mon Mothma nods. “Yes, exactly. Do you realize what this means? That all these years we’ve trusted the children of our greatest enemy! And now he is emperor,” she shook her head. “With them at his side, the galaxy is doomed, Dodonna. With Vader in charge, there will never be peace. And now that he has our two strongest allies with him they will surely crush us. The Alliance will die.”

Dodonna frowned. “No, that can’t be true,” he muttered. “If he were out to crush us, don’t you think he’d have killed us all when he had the chance? Darth Vader isn’t a negotiator; he just takes what he wants. Is there a chance that he’s changed? That whatever metamorphosis that transformed the hero Anakin Skywalker into the villain Darth Vader has been reversed?”

Mon Mothma sighed. "I suppose anything is possible," she conceded. "We will just have to wait and see what he does next."

"We know what he is going to do next," Dodonna pointed out. "He's taken the power from the regional governors and given it back to the planetary systems. He means to reinstitute the Imperial Senate. Do those sound like the actions of a Sith?"

"No, perhaps not," Mon Mothma conceded. "Still, all the duplicity has me suspicious. We cannot trust that he will not use or manipulate his own family if it means getting him the power he craves. We must be on our guard, General."

"Of course," Dodonna replied with a nod of his head. "Always."

"I understand how serious the situation is, Luke," Han said. "But if we stop, the Alliance will catch up with us and all this will be for nothing."

"If we *don't* stop, then my father will die," countered Luke adamantly. "He is bleeding profusely, Han! If we don't get him to a medical facility as soon as possible, then he won't survive!"

Han sighed with frustration, feeling caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Chewie, check the navicomputer," he said at last. "What's the closest planet?"

Chewbacca checked the readout on the computer and barked a response to Han.

"Omwat," he muttered. "Not exactly Coruscant, but I suppose it will have to do. Set a course, Chewie."

"Thanks, Han," Luke replied.

"I'm going to take you there, but if I want to keep them off your trail, I can't stay," Han replied.

"I understand," Luke replied.

Padmé, Luke and Leia found the medical facility in the capital city to be professional and efficient. Anakin was taken in at once when they had seen the extremity of his injuries. Padmé and her children waited outside of the examining room as the physician tended to Anakin's injuries.

"I hope that Han is able to keep the Alliance off of our trail," Padmé said as she paced worriedly.

"Don't worry Mother," Leia said. "Han can disappear better than anyone I know."

"Yes, that's certainly true," Luke replied. "They'll be hunting for him for the next week."

Padmé nodded her mind preoccupied. "I wonder what's taking them so long?" she muttered.

"It hasn't been that long, Mother," Leia replied. "It just seems long because, well, because..."

"Because we're worried?" Luke suggested. He could see that his sister was as concerned about their father's wellbeing as he and their mother was, and wanted her to admit it.

“Yes, that’s true,” Padmé said.

“We’re all worried,” Luke said, looking at Leia. “Aren’t we Leia?”

Leia looked up at her brother, unable to deny her feelings any more.

“Yes, Luke,” she agreed. “We are.”

Luke smiled at his sister. “He’ll be okay, Leia,” he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “He’s strong; he will make it.”

“Excuse me; are you the family of the patient?”

Padmé, Luke and Leia turned to see the physician who had admitted Anakin standing before them.

“Yes, we are,” Padmé said. “What news do you have? Is he alright??”

“No, he isn’t,” the doctor replied. “He is alive, but he has lost a great deal of blood.”

“Can’t you give him a transfusion?” Luke asked.

“Normally that would be standard procedure,” the doctor replied. “But your father’s blood has... unusual characteristics. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“What are you talking about?” Leia demanded. “What characteristics?”

“It’s the midi-chlorians,” Padmé said, realizing what the doctor was talking about. “That has to be it. Anakin’s blood is unusually high in midi-chlorians.”

“Midi-chlorians?” Leia asked. “What are they?”

“Midi-chlorians are microscopic life-forms that reside within the cells of all living things and communicate with the Force,” Padmé replied, remembering what Anakin had told her many years ago. “Your father’s count is higher than anyone’s, even the Jedi masters.”

“So does that mean he cannot be given a transfusion??” Luke asked desperately. ‘I can’t accept that!’

“I didn’t say that,” the doctor. “But the blood we give him must be compatible both in type and in... midi-chlorian count.”

Padmé turned to her children, as her hopes soared. “Luke, Leia, one of you could be the donor,” she said.

“That’s right,” the doctor replied. “As his children you will have a comparable count. Let’s get you both tested at once.”

Chapter 52

CHAPTER 52

After much cajoling and pleading, Padmé convinced the nurses to allow her to see her husband. Seeing Anakin so still and pale did not make the situation any easier, however, as the wait for the result of the blood tests dragged on and on. Granted, this facility was not exactly the infirmary on Coruscant; but she had not expected that things would take this long.

Padmé sat at Anakin's bedside, holding his hand, the only sound in the room the heart monitor beside his bed. Anakin had been unconscious for nearly 7 hours, and though she was no doctor, Padmé knew that this was not a good thing. The longer he remained unconscious, the weaker he became; and Anakin would need all his strength if he were to fight for his life. *Don't leave me, Ani*, she pleaded to him silently, hoping that on some level of consciousness he was still able to read her mind. *I can't lose you again.*

The sound of the doors opening was heard and Padmé looked up to see her two children entering the room. The phlebotomist who had conducted their blood tests accompanied them.

"Well?" she asked. "What news?"

"It seems both of us have inherited the high medi-chlorian count," Luke told his mother. "Father's count is incredibly high, but we aren't too far behind."

"So that means either of you can give him the transfusion he needs to live?" Padmé asked hopefully.

"No, only one of us has the same blood type as Father," Luke replied, looking at his sister. "It's Leia."

Padmé turned her eyes to Leia's. *This is it*, she thought, *the moment of truth. Will my daughter let her father die as payment for his past transgressions against her? Or will she be able to get beyond the past and do what is right?*

"Well Leia," Padmé said at last. "It's up to you. Will you do it? Will you save your father's life?"

Leia looked over at the form of her unconscious father. So much had happened between them in the past weeks; Leia could no longer deny the transformation in her father. Nor could she deny the connection between them. Somehow the fact that they shared the same blood type made that connection stronger, more real. *Will I save him? How can I not??*

"Yes, I'll do it," Leia said at last, not taking her eyes from her father's still form. "He's my father, I have to save him."

Padmé's eyes filled with tears as she walked over to Leia and embraced her tightly. "Thank you," she whispered to her.

"Well, let's get to it," the technician said. "Time is of the essence."

Why do I feel so weak? was Anakin's first thought as he slowly regained consciousness. The next thought was to remark that he was in considerable pain also. It was in his back, and radiated into his shoulders.

"Ani, can you hear me?"

That's Padmé's voice he thought as he struggled to regain his senses. His eyelids felt incredibly heavy, and it frustrated him that he was so weak. Finally he managed to open his eyes, and was rewarded by the sight of his wife's smiling face looking down at him.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," he replied weakly.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Like I've been run over by a reek," he said.

Padmé laughed. "Well, not quite," she replied. She looked down at his hand that she held in her own. 'I was so afraid that I'd lose you, Ani,' she said softly. "I've been so worried."

"I'm too stubborn to die, Padmé," he told her with a weak smile. "You ought to know that by now."

Padmé laughed again, the relief and happiness spilling out of her.

"Are the kids here?" he asked. He turned his head to look around the room and stopped when he saw Leia asleep in a bed beside his. 'What happened?' he asked, alarmed. "How did Leia get hurt? Is she alright??"

"Yes, calm down Ani," Padmé said gently. "She's fine. She's just a little worn out from the transfusion."

Anakin looked up at his wife. "Transfusion?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"Blood transfusion," Padmé explained. "Leia donated the blood you needed, Anakin. She saved your life."

Anakin looked back at his sleeping daughter, astonished by Padmé's revelation. "She did that...for me?" he asked softly.

"Yes she did," Padmé replied. "Her blood type matches yours, Luke's does not. She was your only hope of survival."

Anakin did not know what to say. He was astonished that Leia would be willing to do such a thing, and it filled his heart with hope, love, and gratitude to his daughter. *Perhaps, at last, she has accepted me..*

"You're awake!"

Anakin looked over to see Luke approaching him, a smile on his face.

"How are you feeling?" Luke asked his father as he came to stand beside his mother.

"Grateful to be alive," Anakin replied. He could feel the fatigue washing over him again, threatening to overpower him.

“You need to rest,” Luke said, sensing his father’s struggle to remain awake.

“Luke is right,” Padmé said. ‘You can barely keep your eyes open,’ she observed. “Rest now, Ani,” she said, bending to him and giving him a light kiss.

Anakin surrendered to the fatigue, closing his eyes once again and drifting off to sleep.

“Does he know that Leia saved his life?” Luke asked as he and Padmé watched Anakin sleep.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, he was quite shocked, actually,” she replied.

“I’m not surprised,” Luke said. “The two of them have been sparring for weeks now. Still, I knew it was only a matter of time before she came to accept him.”

“I have to admit that I had my doubts, Luke,” Padmé responded. “Leia is so stubborn, so single minded, so much like her father.”

Luke chuckled. “Yes, I’ve seen that myself. Now come with me, Mother. You could use some rest yourself I think. Or at least a bite to eat. These two will be sleeping for a while yet I think.”

“I think you’re right,” Padmé replied. “I am a little hungry now that you mention it.”

“Come on then,” Luke said, taking his mother’s hand. “Let’s go.”

Leia woke up a short time later. She opened her eyes and took a moment to get her bearings. Remembering where she was, she turned to see her father sleeping in the bed next to hers. His face looked so peaceful in sleep, and Leia had to admit that she felt a tremendous sense of relief knowing that he was going to live.

“Nice to see you awake.”

Leia looked over to see a nurse as he entered the room. He was carrying a tray of food. “How are you feeling?” he asked. “Are you hungry?”

Leia nodded. “I’m starving,” she replied, looking longingly at the food before her.

The nurse smiled. “I thought you might be,” he replied as he set the tray down on the table beside Leia’s bed. “This should help.”

“Thank you,” Leia said as she commenced eating. “How is he?” she asked.

The nurse stepped over to Anakin’s bed and checked the monitor above his bed. “He’s stabilized nicely,” he replied. “I understand he was awake for a short time earlier.”

“Really?” Leia asked. “That’s... wonderful,” she decided at last with a smile.

The nurse nodded. “Your father is in amazing physical condition,” he commented. “He’ll be up and around in no time.”

“That’s good to hear,” Leia replied. “Where are my mother and brother?”

“I’m not sure,” the nurse replied as he made note of Leia’s vital signs. “But I’m sure they’ll be back soon enough.”

Leia nodded as she continued to eat her meal. Now that the crisis of her father's brush with death had passed, her thoughts turned to Han, and wondered where he was. *I hope he's alright*, she thought anxiously. *I just hope that bucket of bolts didn't let him down*, she thought, knowing all too well of the *Falcon's* legendary malfunctions.

"Your vitals are all perfect," announced the nurse. 'I'll check back with you in a little while,' the nurse said. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Well, you could tell me where my clothes are," she said, looking down at the shift she wore.

"They're in the 'fresher," the nurse replied, pointing in the direction of the refresher. "Feel free to get dressed whenever you're ready."

The nurse left as Leia finished off the rest of her meal. *That hit the spot...* she reflected as she dabbed her mouth with a napkin. She then got off the bed and headed for the 'fresher to get dressed.

Chapter 53

CHAPTER 53

Leia left the 'fresher, happy to be out of the oversized hospital gown. She looked around and noticed the neither her mother nor her brother were present. Looking over to where her father was convalescing, she was startled to see him watching her.

"Just wake up?" she asked casually, feeling awkward with him.

Anakin nodded. He too felt awkward, for he was uncertain of his daughter's motivations for agreeing to donate blood to save his life. *Had Padmé and Luke coerced her?* If so, then she would undoubtedly feel more bitterness than ever. He watched her as she walked over to the bed, trying to read what was in her heart. But, as usual, she was blocking him; something he had come to expect from her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, standing a discreet distance from the bed.

"Not bad," he told her. "Why did you do it, Leia?"

"Excuse me?"

"Did your mother talk you into it? Or was it Luke?" he asked.

Leia frowned as she began to understand what he was driving at.

"No, they didn't," she retorted. "Neither of them. What makes you ask that? Why would you assume that I would need to be coerced into helping you?"

"Because of our past," Anakin replied. "Because I know that you will never be able to forgive what I did to you."

Leia looked away for a moment, her jaw tightening ever so slightly. "That doesn't mean I'd want you to die," she responded at last, not looking at him.

"I'm grateful," Anakin replied. "Truly grateful, Leia."

She shrugged. "Well, you saved my life, so I guess we're even."

"I'm not sure we'll ever be even, Leia," Anakin replied softly. "Not after what I did. If I could change the past..."

"Please don't continue," Leia said, looking at him finally. "Nothing will ever change what happened. Nothing."

Anakin could see in her dark eyes the conflicting emotions. He sensed that part of her wanted to forgive him, to allow him into her heart; but the past was still a huge obstacle for her, and no doubt always would be. *Some things are simply unforgivable*, he reflected somberly. *Some actions do not merit a second chance.*

"I'm sorry," he simply said, looking away from her. Her eyes were so much like Padmé's; seeing them looking at him the way they were right now was too difficult, too painful. It

brought back too many memories of past abominations committed against both wife and daughter, abominations he would never forgive himself for.

The tension between father and daughter was finally alleviated by the return of Padmé and Luke.

“Well there you are,” Leia said, relieved to see them both.

“You’re looking well,” Padmé said as she approached Leia. “When did they release you from bed?”

“Just a short time ago,” Leia replied. “Any word from Han yet?”

Padmé shook her head as her eyes fell onto Anakin’s face. “Not yet,” she said. “How are you feeling, Ani?” She could see in his eyes that he was troubled.

“I’m alright, Padmé,” he replied.

Padmé sensed that something had transpired between he and Leia; both seemed edgy.

“Have you had anything to eat?” Padmé asked Leia.

“Yes, I just did,” Leia replied.

“Has the doctor been back to see you, Father?” Luke asked, turning to Anakin. “Father??”

Anakin turned his attention back to his son. “What did you say?”

Luke and Padmé exchanged a look, both concerned by Anakin’s preoccupation. “Luke asked if the doctor had been back to see you,” she said.

“Not that I am aware of,” he replied. “I just woke up a short time ago.”

“A nurse was in,” Leia put in. “He said your vitals signs looked good.”

“That’s wonderful,” Padmé said with a smile, picking up Anakin’s hand. “I’m so relieved.”

Anakin managed a smile. “Well I have our daughter to thank for that,” he said, looking over at Leia.

“We are all grateful to her for that,” Luke said, putting an arm around his sister’s shoulders.

“Yes, we certainly are,” Padmé added, smiling at Leia.

Leia felt embarrassed and uneasy by all the praise and attention. She looked at her father, who seemed as uncomfortable as she did.

“Well, look who’s awake.”

The four turned to see the attending physician enter the room. She walked over to Anakin’s bed. “How are you feeling?” she asked, looking up at Anakin’s vitals posted on the diagnostic screen above the bed. ‘Looks good,’ she said. “You’re making a remarkable recovery.”

Anakin nodded. “So when can I get out of here?”

The physician smiled. “Now let’s not be hasty,” she said. “You don’t want to rush things; after all, your body has suffered a great deal of trauma.”

“Story of my life,” Anakin muttered.

“Well we’re not going anywhere soon,” Luke said. “So you might as well take your time, Father,” he said.

Anakin frowned. “Why is that??”

“Well, Han brought us here,” Luke explained. “But he left immediately, as we figured the Alliance would be behind us.”

Anakin was puzzled for a moment until he remembered what had happened on the command ship. *Yes, things have become quite complicated now, haven’t they?*

“So where are we, anyway?” Anakin asked. ‘And how do we get home?’ “Omwat,” Padmé replied. “We’re on Omwat. And as for how we’re getting home, that remains to be seen.”

“I’m sure Han will arrange something,” Luke said. “He’s always got something up his sleeve.”

Anakin frowned. “He could be days before he manages to get back here,” he stated. ‘I have a better idea,’ he continued, turning to Padmé. “Send word to Firmus Piett,” he told her. “Tell him to come and bring us home.”

“Do you think he can get here faster than Han?” Padmé asked skeptically. “We’re very far from Coruscant, Ani.”

“I know that,” he replied. “But Piett won’t have x-wings on his tail. He’ll get here fast enough once he knows the situation.”

“Okay, I’ll send word at once,” Padmé replied and left the room.

Anakin looked at his children. “Looks like you’re coming to Coruscant too.”

Luke nodded. “I guess so,” he replied. “It’s for sure we can’t go back to the Alliance.”

“No,” Leia concurred, a frown on her brow. “I can’t believe Mon Mothma threw us in the brig, after all we’ve done for the Alliance. She has too much power; it’s gone to her head.”

“Power does have a way of doing that,” observed Anakin. ‘Soon enough they will understand the true reasons why you were on board the *Executor*,’ he added. “Once the Empire has been dismantled, there will be no more need to hide our identities.”

“And how easy do you think it will be to do that?” Leia asked skeptically.

“It won’t be easy,” Anakin replied. “And it won’t happen over night; but I am determined to make it happen. I’ve already begun the process.”

“That’s right,” Luke said. “We heard about that. So what will become of Leia and me? We don’t have a place in the Alliance anymore.”

“You will always have a place with me, Luke,” Anakin replied. “And you as well, Leia, that is, if you wish it.”

Leia looked at Luke. “I want to be with my brother,” she said. “No matter what.”

Anakin smiled. “Well then, it looks like we’ll all be together after all, one way or another,” he said, looking at Leia. *Like it or not...*

7

Chapter 54

CHAPTER 54

"A transmission from Piett was received a short time ago," Luke announced to his parents as he joined them in the infirmary. "He has just entered the system and figures he'll be here within the next three hours."

"Good," Anakin replied, anxious to be released from his enforced captivity. "Not soon enough for me."

Padmé smiled, knowing how impatient her husband was to resume his life. Secretly she was glad that they had been delayed in their departure. Knowing Anakin as well as she did, she knew that he never would have submitted to the rest he needed to recover otherwise.

"No word from Han?" Leia asked her anxiety evident in her voice.

"I'm afraid not," Luke replied. 'But don't worry, Leia,' he added. "You know Han. He's bound to just show up unannounced any time now."

"Does he know where we'll be after we leave here?" Padmé asked.

"I told him we'd be on Coruscant," Leia replied. "I didn't know what else to tell him. It's not like we can go back to the Alliance."

"No, I think we've burned that bridge," Luke told his sister.

She snorted. "No, *they* burned it, Luke," she retorted. "Mon Mothma will be sorry she accused us of treason."

Anakin frowned, not liking the way his daughter was talking. *She sounds like me*, he reflected. *Unforgiving and vengeful*.

"Soon all will be revealed and Mon Mothma will understand the necessity of all this," Anakin declared. "Right now we have to hide the truth from her and your other allies. One day they will understand, Leia."

Leia wasn't as confident as he was, and didn't try to hide it. "So what are we going to do?" she asked. "Luke and I? We can't let it be known that our parents are the emperor and empress, or else your pretense will be destroyed."

"Yes, I know," Anakin said, frowning. "This is something I hadn't anticipated when we set out to rescue you and Luke."

"I guess not," Leia replied, reminded all of a sudden of a similar moment on the Death Star months earlier.

This is some rescue! When you came in here didn't you have a plan for getting out??

He's the brains, sweetheart!

Typical Han Solo, not thinking about the future, just acting on impulse. Leia suddenly realized how alike Han and her father were, and it made her wonder if that was part of the reason that they couldn't get along. Despite the fact that she and Han loved one another, they still drove one another crazy. Was that the reason her father and her drove one another crazy? *But I don't love him*, she told herself adamantly. *He may be my father, I may owe him my life, but I will never love him... never.*

Anakin watched his daughter as she went through her thought process. *Not if you never forgive me, Leia, not if you never let me in.*

She looked over at him quickly, forgetting momentarily about his telepathic prowess. In his eyes she could see that she had hurt him, and she looked away.

"I'm going for a walk," Anakin said gruffly.

Padmé was confused by his sudden sullenness, and looked over at her children for an explanation.

"What was that about?" she asked, knowing that there was much that went on that she wasn't privy to between the three of them.

Luke shrugged, knowing, but not wanting to be the one to tell her. "I think Leia can tell you," he said, looking at his sister. "I'm going to go talk to him."

Padmé watched her son leave the room and then turned to Leia. "I don't understand you, Leia," she said. "I truly don't."

"What do you mean?" Leia asked.

"I think you know," Padmé replied, growing tired of her daughter's attitude. "How long are you going to hurt him? Does it somehow erase what happened in the past when you see that pain in his eyes?"

Leia folded her arms over her chest, becoming defensive with her mother's accusations.

"Of course not," she retorted. "Nothing can make up for the past."

"No, you're right there," Padmé agreed. "I should know, for I lost more than any one because of what happened to your father. You seem to think that you are the only one who is hurting because of the past, that you are the only one who has the right to resentment. Well let me assure you, that is not the case. I'm not trying to belittle what happened to you, I know what Darth Vader did to you."

"If you know, then surely you can see why I can never forgive him," Leia replied, her voice rising with emotion.

"Do you know how much you are like your father, Leia?" Padmé returned. "So much that it frightens me. You see, part of the reason he turned to the Dark Side was out of a sense of resentment. He never forgave the Jedi Council for not allowing him to go to his mother when he was sure that she needed him. His mother died, brutally tortured at the hands of Tusken Raiders, and Anakin had spent weeks suffering from prophetic dreams foretelling her death. And yet the Council forbade him to go to her, and, being the dutiful padawan that he was, he obeyed them. He never forgave them for that, and it ate away at him, allowing Palpatine to sow the seeds of darkness in him."

“So what are you saying, Mother?” Leia countered, inwardly shaken by Padmé’s revelation. “That you think I’m going to turn to the Dark Side?”

“No, I’m not saying that,” Padmé replied. “But I am saying that the negative feelings you are holding onto so tightly will destroy you if you don’t learn to deal with them and get past them. Your father is living proof of the destructiveness of anger, of resentment.”

Leia turned away from her mother, unable to face her any longer. “I am trying,” she said at last.

“Are you?” Padmé challenged her. ‘Your father has saved your life twice now,’ she reminded her. “And saved Han’s as well from a life of servitude to Jabba the Hutt. He has brought the four of us together; perhaps in a rather unconventional way, but were it not for his determination, we might never have found one another again. And now he is willing to devote his life to reverse the destructive influence his master had on the galaxy.”

“An influence that he had a hand in,” Leia pointed out.

Padmé shook her head with a sigh. “I don’t know how to get through to you, Leia,” she said softly. “I thought that when you agreed to donate blood to save his life that you had finally accepted him, that things would be different. But they aren’t, are they? You still resent him, you still haven’t forgiven him. Will you ever? Or will you hold onto that resentment for the rest of your life?”

Leia frowned, not wishing to think about what her mother was saying. She didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to reflect on the emotions that continued to confuse her. It was far easier just to see things in black and white; Anakin Skywalker was Darth Vader, and Darth Vader was evil. Period. End of story. What more was there to say?

“I think I understand,” Padmé said at last, seeing that Leia was not about to respond. “Well I’m sorry that you feel that way, Leia. If you gave him half a chance, I think you’d see that he is a remarkable man and more than worthy of a second chance. But you have to try, Leia; you have to let go of your anger, or you will never see him as anything but the monster who hurt you in the past.”

Padmé left Leia at this point, having said her piece.

“It’s not so easy, Mother,” Leia said softly, as a tear ran down her cheek. “If only it was.”

Chapter 55

CHAPTER 55

"How are you feeling?"

Anakin sat down beside his son before responding. "I'm alright," he replied. "Just anxious to get out of here."

Luke nodded. "Yeah, I know." He looked at his father, knowing that something else was eating away at him. "What else is on your mind?" he asked.

Anakin looked at him. "What makes you think there is?" he asked.

Luke smiled. "You forget, Father; I can read you just as easily as you can read me."

Anakin nodded, a smile spreading across his face. "How could I forget?" He sighed, looking down at his boots. "I suppose I'm just feeling discouraged about your sister. She truly hates me, Luke. I'm beginning to think that she always will."

"I don't believe any of that," Luke replied. "She just needs time."

Anakin shook his head. "She's had time, Luke," he retorted. "It's been many weeks now since she learned the truth, and in that time I've done everything I can to show her how I feel about her. I don't know what is left for me to do, son."

In truth Luke felt the same way, but he didn't want to admit it to his father.

"You don't either, do you?" Anakin remarked, looking at his son.

Luke looked at his father, and was about to respond when they were interrupted.

"Oh, there you are."

Anakin turned away from his son to see the medical officer standing before them.

"Were you looking for me?" Anakin asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Your wife tells me that you are leaving us soon, and I wanted to give you a final check before you do."

Anakin groaned inwardly, tired of being examined. It seemed to him that he'd received more medical attention in the past several weeks than in his previous forty four years of life.

"I'm fine, I assure you," he told her at last.

"I'm sure you are," the physician replied. "But let's just double check to be sure."

"Very well," Anakin sighed, as Luke smiled at his father.

Enjoying this, Luke?

You bet.

Nice.

Luke chuckled as he watched his father walk along with the physician. He was concerned about Anakin, for he knew how frustrated his father was. The situation with Leia had him depressed, and Luke was at a loss to know what to do or say anymore. He had spent many hours speaking with his twin, trying to convince her that their father had changed, that he was no longer the villainous monster who had terrorized the galaxy for two decades. Although Leia admitted that Anakin had chanced, she still could not accept him. The past was a very painful subject for her because of him, and it seemed as though she would never get over it. Luke worried that his sister's unyielding attitude would prevent their family from ever being whole, and Anakin from ever being healed.

"Now just sit right up here," the medic ordered Anakin after he had removed his tunic. "Let's have a look at that wound."

Anakin looked at Padmé who stood at his side, smiling at his efforts to hide his impatience.

"This was your doing, wasn't it?" he asked her.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. "Mine?" she echoed. "What makes you think I had anything to do with it?"

"Because I know you," he muttered. She just shook her head. Her eyes traveled to the other side of the room to where a medical droid was performing a last check on Leia.

"She hates me, Padmé," he said softly.

Padmé frowned, looking at him again.

"No matter what I do, she will always hate me."

Padmé shook her head. "She doesn't hate you, Ani," she replied. "She is just having difficulty accepting that you are her father."

Anakin snorted. "That's an understatement," he muttered. "I don't know what else I can do, Padmé. What can I do to change her heart?"

Padmé sighed, her heart aching for him, from the look in his eyes. She looked over to Leia, and could see that her daughter was listening to what Anakin was saying. Her face remained impassive, however, as she did not register any reaction to what he'd said.

"I don't know what to tell you, Ani," Padmé replied at last. "I suppose she is only one to answer that question."

"Do you remember how certain I was that you were carrying a girl, Padmé?" Anakin said, a slight smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

Padmé nodded. "I remember," she replied with a smile.

"I remember when we were first married seeing this little girl in the youngest of the youngling classes," he recalled, his features softening at the memory. "She was tiny, and had big brown eyes. I remember wishing for a little girl like her, and thinking that if we ever had a

daughter that she'd look like that. I don't know what happened to that girl; I never saw her again."

Padmé took his hand and squeezed it, not needing Jedi senses to see how much he was hurting. She looked back at Leia. *Do you know how much you are hurting him? Does it make your own pain less by doing so?* She thought to herself, wishing she had Anakin's ability to project thoughts into the minds of others.

Leia looked away from her mother, unnerved by the intensity of her stare; by the poignant words she'd overheard her father utter. *He wanted a little girl... he knew that Mother was carrying me, a girl, his little girl, the little girl he'd wanted since they'd married..*

"Well, you seem to be in fine shape," the medic announced.

Leia looked up at him. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I said you're fine," he repeated.

"Oh, thanks," she replied, hopping down off the examination table. She walked over to where her father and mother were.

"Are we all set to go?" Leia asked.

Anakin and Padmé looked up at her, startled by her sudden appearance.

"Your father is in perfect health," the medic announced. "Although he could use more rest," he added.

Anakin glanced back at the physician. "Does that mean I can leave, or not?"

"You're free to go," she replied with a smile. "Somehow I doubt that we could convince you to stay even if we tried."

Padmé smiled. "You're right about that," she replied.

Anakin didn't need to be told twice, and stood up from the table, taking the tunic his wife handed to him.

"Luke is waiting for us," Anakin said, looking at Padmé. "Piett ought to be here soon."

"Thank you for everything," Padmé said, turning to the physicians.

"You're most welcome, Arcadia," she replied, using the false name that Padmé had used while on the planet. "I wish you a safe journey."

"Thank you," Anakin replied. "For everything."

Chapter 56

CHAPTER 56

The journey back to Coruscant was a long one. Padmé gave in to the fatigue she was feeling and went to sleep in the passenger lounge. Anakin was grateful to Piett for having the consideration to bring a comfortable vessel for the long journey, and was glad to see his wife getting some sleep. He knew that she carried a lot of worry and stress inside of her, and it concerned him that she was not getting enough rest.

“So what is the plan once we reach Coruscant?” Luke asked his father as they sat down to have a bite to eat. Leia sat with them, keeping to herself for the most part.

“I was thinking that the two of you would need to hide your true identities,” he replied. “So perhaps if you were to pose as members of the household staff that might work.”

“Yes, I think so,” Luke answered. “What do you think Leia?”

Leia had not been paying attention and did not answer.

“Leia?”

Hearing her brother’s voice she looked up. “What did you say?”

Luke exchanged a glance with Anakin. “Haven’t you heard a word we’ve been saying?” Luke asked.

“Sorry,” Leia mumbled. ‘I’m just worried about Han,’ she replied. “And pretty tired too.”

“You should try to get some sleep,” Anakin suggested. “It’s a long trip to Coruscant.”

“I don’t think I could sleep even if I tried,” she replied. “Too much on my mind.”

“I can understand that,” Anakin told her. “I have that problem all the time.”

Leia didn’t ask what was on his mind, and was grateful that he didn’t ask her the same. In fact, Leia had noticed a decided change in her father’s attitude recently. It was almost as though he had given up on her, and Leia wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that. *Was this just another of his mind games; to feign indifference as some sort of bizarre punishment?*

Anakin looked at his daughter, reading her thoughts easily. She looked at him, becoming unnerved by the intensity of his eyes. Anakin sensed this, and looked back at Luke.

“I’m sure your mother will have some ideas,” Anakin continued. “She’s always been the more logical one,” he added with a smile.

Luke smiled too. “Are you saying that you’re not logical?”

Anakin shook his head. “No, I never have been. I think with my heart, let my emotions govern my actions. Not a good thing sometimes, letting your heart rule over your head,” he commented, looking down at his half eaten meal.

"Perhaps not," Luke put in. "But if it hadn't been for your heart you'd never have found us all."

Anakin looked up at his son. "No, that's true," he conceded. He sighed. "You would think that the Jedi Order would have seen the value of the human heart rather than trying to deny its existence."

"How did they do that?" Luke asked.

"It was forbidden for Jedi to have attachments, emotional attachments," Anakin replied.

"So how did you and Mother manage to get married?" Luke asked.

"We married in secret," Anakin replied. "Going against the Jedi Code."

"You went against the Jedi code??" Leia asked.

Anakin looked at his daughter. "Yes, I did," he replied simply. "I would have gone against the universe to be with your mother."

Leia did not know how to respond to such an admission, and she looked away.

"I'm beat," Luke said rubbing his eyes with a yawn. "I think I'm going to try and catch an hour or two of sleep."

"Good idea," Anakin replied. "I may try myself in a while."

Luke stood up, noticing the look on Leia's face. *Don't leave me alone with him!* She said to him. Luke just walked away, however, thinking that perhaps it was about time the two of them had a heart to heart talk.

Anakin felt as uneasy as Leia about being left alone. Still, he knew that he and his daughter needed to talk, to get everything out in the open, or else their relationship would never get off the ground.

"So what's on your mind?" Anakin asked, breaking the awkward silence.

Leia shrugged. "Han mostly," she replied, not looking up at him. "I haven't heard back from him in a few days."

"Captain Solo is very resourceful," Anakin commented. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

"You don't know that," she retorted.

"No, the future is never easy to see," he returned. "Just as the past is never easy to forget."

"You're right there," Leia said, looking up at him at last. "Impossible in fact."

Anakin met her stare. "If there's something you wish to say to me, Leia, I wish you'd just come out with it."

Leia hesitated for a moment, not certain she wanted to dredge up all the ghosts of the past. She wasn't confident in her ability to speak of what happened without losing control of her carefully constructed demeanor, and she did not want her father to see her in a vulnerable state.

"I'm not sure you do," she replied at last, looking down at the food that she had barely touched.

"Why would I ask if I didn't wish it?" he retorted.

"I don't know," she replied. "You do a lot of things that don't make any sense to me."

"Such as?"

Leia took a deep breath, steeling her nerves. "Saving Han, for starters," she began.

"I explained that when we were on Bespin," he countered.

"You said something but I didn't really understand what you meant," she replied.

"Didn't understand or didn't believe me?" he responded.

Leia looked up at this point. "Well, to be honest, I didn't believe you," she replied. "You have to understand my point of view."

"I do understand."

"I don't think you do," she retorted. "Not unless you wake up at night from nightmares of being tortured, your mind still full of the horrible images implanted there."

Anakin sighed. "There is nothing that can erase what I did on that terrible day, Leia; no way I can undo what I did. If I could, you know that I would."

"But you can't," she retorted, her emotions bubbling to the surface. "You can't undo it, and there's nothing you can say or do to make the pain of that day go away. Nothing."

"Perhaps not," he conceded. "But knowing you feel that way won't stop me from loving you, Leia. You do know that I love you, don't you?"

Leia looked up at him again, her eyes troubled, reflecting the conflict within her.

"With all my heart, I love you," Anakin continued. "You are my child, Leia, the daughter I'd always dreamed of having. And I know that you may never accept me, never feel anything but resentment and animosity where I am concerned; that won't change the way I feel about you."

Leia shook her head. "You see?" she said, her voice cracking ever so slightly. "This is what I mean. How can you say something like that when I know that part of you is still immersed in the Dark Side? Sometimes I don't even know who you are, Darth Vader or Anakin Skywalker!"

"Does it matter what name I use, Leia?" he replied calmly. "I am your father no matter what. My feelings for you are the same where I am known as Vader or Skywalker."

"So you admit that part of you is still Vader?"

"I have renounced the Dark Side," he replied. "But it isn't so easy, Leia. The transformation isn't instantaneous, just as my descent into Darkness wasn't. But I am fighting it, and I will defeat it. Now that I have my family, your mother and brother's steadfast belief in me, I will triumph over the Darkness once and for all, make no mistake."

“For the sake of the galaxy, I hope you do,” she responded. “For my mother’s sake as well. It would destroy her all over again to have you turn back to the Dark Side now.”

Anakin nodded. “I know,” he replied. “And I won’t let that happen again. I have already caused her too much heart ache.”

“And yet she has forgiven you,” Leia observed.

“She has,” Anakin replied. “I’m not certain I deserve her forgiveness, but she has given it nonetheless.”

“She is very strong,” Leia commented. “Far stronger than I am.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” Anakin replied. “You have great strength, Leia. I’ve often heard it said that pain is what makes a person strong; in my case, I think it only served to destroy me,” he said, more to himself than to her.

“What do you know of pain?” she asked, angry that he would compare himself with her mother, with her.

“A great deal,” he said, stung by her question. “More than you will ever know, Leia. Some day I will tell you, that is, if you care enough to hear it.” He stood up at this point, exhausted and weary from the negative emotions he felt from his daughter.

“Just one more thing,” he added before leaving her. “There is no faster way to the Dark Side than through hatred, Leia. Hatred and anger are what fuels the Dark Side. Remember that.”

Leia was too stunned to reply, and could only watch her father retreat from the room.

Anakin was met in the corridor by Firmus Piett.

“Anakin, good news,” Piett said upon running into him. “I’ve just made contact with Han Solo.”

“What did you say??”

Both men turned to see Leia standing in the doorway.

“I’ve made contact with Han Solo,” Piett repeated, speaking to Leia. “Thanks to some adjustments to our long range sensors made by your father, I located the Falcon and was able to raise Solo.”

Leia turned to Anakin and, for the first time, looked at him with true appreciation and gratitude in her eyes. Anakin smiled. “Go talk to him, Leia,” he suggested. “I know how anxious you’ve been to do so.”

Leia smiled, and nodded, and then bolted from the room.

Anakin watched her go, feeling a little better about the future of their relationship than he had mere moments before. “Good work, Piett,” he said, putting a hand on the admiral’s shoulder. “Well done.”

Chapter 57

CHAPTER 57

Anakin headed for the cockpit with Piett, where he checked the long range sensors. Sure enough, the Falcon was on the screen, not even 2 parsecs away.

“Did he give you any indication as to his situation?” Anakin asked.

Piett shook his head. “No sir,” he replied. “But I rather got the impression that he was still being pursued. You know how tenacious those Rebel pilots can be.”

“I do indeed,” Anakin muttered. He looked over his shoulder as he heard someone else enter the cockpit. It was Leia.

“Han is in trouble, isn’t he?” Anakin asked, turning his attention back to the sensors.

She only nodded, trying hard to fight the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes.

“Well he won’t be for long,” Anakin said as he changed their course.

“What are you doing?” Leia asked as she sat down behind her father.

“I’m going to help Han,” he replied. “What else?”

“Sir, if the Rebels outnumber him, then we can’t do much...”

“I don’t care,” Anakin replied, cutting Piett off. “I am not about to let Solo fight this battle alone. Besides, Piett, you forget who you’re talking to,” he added with a sideways glance at him.

Piett smiled. “The Hero with No Fear,” Piett replied with. “Yes, how could I forget that?”

“The Hero with no Fear?” Leia repeated. “Who is that?”

“Your father,” Piett replied, nodding in Anakin’s direction. “That’s what he was called during the Clone Wars. There was no greater pilot or warrior than him.”

Leia looked at her father, a mix of surprise and admiration in her eyes. There was so much that she still did not know about him. He had been a different man before the Dark Side destroyed him; and the more she learned, the more she realized that the man he had once been was truly remarkable. Despite herself, she found herself longing to know that man, to find out who it was that had captured the heart of her mother, and won the admiration of a galaxy.

“ETA to Solo’s last coordinates,” Anakin asked Piett.

Piett checked the navi-computer. “Less than one hour,” he replied.

Anakin nodded in acknowledgement. “See to it that the primary laser cannons are fully charged,” he commanded. “I think we’re going to need them.”

“Right away,” Piett said, getting to his feet and leaving the cockpit. Leia took his seat and watched her father as he worked his hands over the controls without even looking at them.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What for?”

“For finding Han,” she replied. “For helping him. I appreciate it.”

Anakin looked at her. “You love him, don’t you?” he asked simply.

Leia nodded her head.

“I know how terrifying it can be when the one you love is in danger,” he said quietly. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, least of all you, Leia.”

Leia frowned, growing more puzzled by the minute by this enigma who was her father. *I need to know what happened to him*, she decided. *I need to know why he became Darth Vader.*

Anakin could read her thoughts quite clearly, but pretended not to know what was in her mind. If she wanted answers, then he was determined that she would have to be the one to ask for them. He was not about to reach out to her again, for her rejection had been too painful, and too frequent. Still, her curiosity encouraged him; at least now she was starting to realize that she did not know who he truly was, and that there was far more to him than the evil Sith Lord she had grown to despise all her life. That at least offered him a glimmer of hope that she would some day realize how Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader were opposite sides of the same man.

“Is Han okay, Leia?” Luke asked as he joined his father and sister.

“For the time being,” she replied. “He’s still being pursued, and the hyperdrive is out. Again.”

Luke shook his head. “No, not again,” he said.

“We’re on our way to meet him,” Anakin put in. “No harm will come to him, hyperdrive or no hyperdrive.”

Piett entered the cockpit at this moment. “We’re all set,” he reported. “Laser cannons are at full power.”

“Good,” Anakin replied. He looked at his children. “Which one of you wants to man the cannon?”

Luke and Leia looked at one another. Manning the cannon would mean firing on pilots who had been allies and comrades mere days ago. Anakin sensed their conflicted emotions, and understood from whence they had come.

“I’ll do it,” Leia said at last. “If it means saving Han and Chewie, I’m prepared to do anything it takes.”

Anakin nodded, giving her a smile. “Very well,” he said. “Take a seat. Luke, you can act as co-pilot, that is if Admiral Piett doesn’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Piett replied. “I know my piloting skills are no match for your son’s,” he added.

Luke smiled. “Well, I don’t know about that,” he said as he took the seat beside his father.

“Nonsense,” Piett replied. “You are the son of the greatest star pilot who ever lived; it’s only natural that you would be a gifted pilot.”

“How long until we reach Han’s last reported coordinates?” Leia asked.

“A matter of moments,” Anakin replied, checking the navi computer. He looked at his daughter. “Are you ready? You can’t hesitate to fire upon them, Leia. If they won’t back down, we will have no choice.”

Leia nodded. “I’m ready,” she said, her eyes fixed on the screen in front of her.

“Piett, see to it that my wife is secure,” Anakin commanded. “It’s going to get a little bumpy soon.”

“I’ll see to her safety at once, sir,” Piett replied and then left the cockpit.

“Prepare to make reversion,” Anakin told his son.

“Reversion in 30 seconds,” Luke announced, watching his controls closely.

The tension in the cockpit was thick as the three waited for what seemed an eternity for the ship to reach its destination. Finally they felt the familiar jerk as the sub light engines kicked in, and through the view screen the stars reappeared.

“There he is!” Leia cried, pointing out the view screen where the Falcon was engaged in a dog fight with a trio of x-wings.

“I see him,” Anakin said, heading the larger Imperial vessel in the direction of the skirmish. “Luke, raise our shields, and then hail the x-wings, tell them to back off or we’ll open fire.”

Luke complied, feeling strange about making such an ultimatum. Mere weeks ago it was him who was flying an x-wing, and now here he was hunting them down in an Imperial ship. *But this is all different... I’m not fighting against the Alliance, only those who would harm my friends.*

“No response to our message, Dad,” Luke reported.

Anakin cocked one eyebrow. “Just as I expected,” he muttered. He looked at Leia. “Target their weapons control,” he told her. “We don’t want to destroy them unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

Leia nodded her head in understanding and then took aim. The three of them watched as the closest x-wing’s weapons control center sparked and crackled under the laser cannon’s fire.

“They’re still not complying” Leia muttered, a deep frown creasing her brow.

“No, they don’t appear to be,” Anakin concurred. “Fire again, Leia, this time disable their main engine.”

Leia was about to take aim when the other two x-wings opened fire upon the Falcon.

"He's lost his front shield," Luke noted, seeing the amount of damage the x-wings' fire was able to inflict upon the freighter.

Leia saw it too, and made a decision. Without a second's hesitation she aimed the weapons at her control on each of the x-wings in succession, blasting each of them to oblivion.

Luke looked over at his twin, shocked that she would take such drastic action. Leia appeared completely calm about what she had done, and turned to Luke. "See if they will listen now, Luke," she suggested.

"They're hailing us," Luke replied, looking back at the comm.. "Asking us to stand down."

"Good," Anakin said. "Let's hope he has more sense than his comrades. See if you can get Han."

"I have him on right now," Luke.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" Han's voice could be heard over the comm..

Leia grinned, relieved and delighted to hear his voice. "Saving your skin, again," she replied.

"THANKS A LOT YOUR HIGHNESSNESS," his voice replied. "NICE OF YOU TO DROP BY."

Anakin shook his head with a smile at the cheek of the young pilot. "Solo, your ship's disabled," he stated, having checked the readout on the Falcon. "I'm going to employ the tractor beam to tether you in. Get ready to come aboard."

"MY PLEASURE!" he replied.

Leia raced out of the cockpit as the tractor beam pulled the Falcon closer.

"Well, looks like we did it," Luke said to his father.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, so we did."

"Something wrong?" asked Luke.

Anakin frowned. "I suppose I'm just a little concerned at the ease with which your sister dispatched those two x-wings. I know it was necessary, but..."

"I know what you mean," Luke agreed. "I felt it too."

Anakin looked at his son. "You make an excellent co-pilot, son," he said with a smile.

"It was an honor to pilot at your side," Luke replied. "I'd always dreamed of having a chance to do so, ever since I was a young boy."

Anakin nodded, wishing with all his heart that he'd known his son when he was a young boy. No doubt he was as remarkable when he was a child as he was now.

"Come on," Anakin said, standing up. "Let's see to our passengers."

"What about the third pilot?" Luke asked as Anakin reached the doorway.

Anakin turned back and looked at the view screen. *Darth Vader would have blown him from the stars long ago*, he reflected; *but I am not he, I will not act like him*.

“Leave him,” he said at last. “He can make his way home.”

Luke nodded as he watched his father leave, hoping that he wasn’t making a grave mistake.

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Chapter 58

CHAPTER 58

“Welcome aboard, Captain Solo.”

Han looked over Leia’s shoulder to the commanding figure of her father standing in the doorway.

“Anakin, you’re alright!” Han said. “You were in pretty rough shape the last time I saw you.”

Anakin walked over to where his daughter stood with Han and his copilot, Chewbacca.

“Well, thanks to my daughter, I’m just fine,” he said looking down at Leia.

Han looked at her too, making a mental note to ask her what had happened back on Omwat.

“I appreciate you coming to help me out,” Han said.

“Guess we’re even then,” Anakin said, looking back at Han and holding out his hand to him.

Han shook Anakin’s hand. “I’m not so sure about that,” he replied. “I think I still owe *you* one or two.”

Anakin smiled, looking back down at his daughter. “You don’t owe me anything,” he said softly, lightly touching Leia’s face. In his eyes she could see how tired he was, as well as the sadness that never seemed to completely disappear from his brilliant blue eyes. Leia stood mesmerized by them for a moment, unable to respond, unable to tear her eyes away from his. And then he walked away. Leia watched him go, confused yet again by her feelings within her.

“Your father is an amazing man,” Han observed.

Leia looked up at him. “I’m surprised to hear *you* say that,” she commented. “You’ve hated Darth Vader for years.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Han conceded. “But the man who just saved my butt again is *not* Darth Vader.”

Leia sighed. *No, he isn’t... so why can’t I accept that? Accept him?*

“No, I guess not,” she replied at last. “Still, I have to wonder how he became Vader in the first place. I need to know.”

“Maybe you should ask him,” Han suggested.

Chewbacca barked in agreement.

“Chewie says he remembers what a hero your father was,” Han translated. “That he saved the village of some of his relatives during the Clones Wars.”

This didn’t surprise Leia; she had learned a lot about the exploits of Anakin Skywalker since finding out that he was her father. What could have caused such a hero to become such a monster? What could have caused him to turn his back on everything and everyone he loved, including, and most especially, his wife? Leia needed answers, for all she had at this point were bits and pieces of truths, none of which amounted to a complete explanation. Yet, part of her was afraid to ask; what if the truth of what happened to her father was too much to bear? What if it only made things worse? *There’s only one way to find out for sure.*

“Anakin, don’t be stubborn.”

“I’m not being stubborn.”

“Yes you are, you are tired, you haven’t slept in more than 24 hours, and you need to lie down.”

“Fine, I’ll lie down; on one condition.”

“And what would that be?”

“That you lie down with me.”

Padmé’s eyes widened at her husband’s suggestion, and the implication behind it.

“Anakin Skywalker, you are truly incorrigible,” she said, shaking her head, looking up at him.

Anakin laughed. “Yes, I know,” he said. He tried in vain to stifle a yawn.

“I saw that,” she said, taking him by the hand and leading him to the passenger lounge. “Time for you to have a rest, your majesty.”

Anakin sighed, allowing his wife to lead him to the cot in the lounge. He sat down on the edge of it and looked up at her.

“You’ve made Leia very happy,” Padmé told him, running her hands gently through his spiky hair.

“Yes, she seemed very happy to see Solo,” he agreed. “I’m relieved to see him myself. He’s a good man, Padmé.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, he is. Now get some rest.”

Anakin hated to admit to his wife just how tired he was. He lay down on his side, propped up on one arm. “Have you given any thought about the roles our children will play when we get back to Coruscant?” he asked.

“I thought perhaps Leia could be my handmaiden,” Padmé replied. “And Han could be your chief of security.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Anakin said as he yawned openly. “What about Luke?”

“What about me?”

Padmé turned around to see Luke enter the lounge.

"We're trying to find a explanation for your presence in our household on Coruscant," Padmé explained. "Perhaps you have some thoughts about that."

"Well, I could always be Dad's apprentice," Luke replied. "After all, everyone still thinks he is a Sith Lord, right? And the Sith are always in two's, or that's what I always thought."

"Yes, that's true," Padmé replied. "What do you think of that idea, Ani?" There was no reply, so Padmé turned back to Anakin. "Ani?"

Anakin was fast asleep, his body finally giving in to the fatigue that had overtaken him. Padmé smiled, and bent down to kiss him lightly on the cheek. She pulled up the blanket over him. "Sleep well, Ani," she said softly.

"He could use the sleep," Luke observed as Padmé came and sat down with him.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, he's exhausted. He's always had trouble sleeping, always too busy to get the rest he needed."

Luke smiled. "Sounds like him," he replied.

Both of them looked up as Leia entered the room.

"Where are Han and Chewie?" Luke asked.

"In the galley," Leia replied, sitting with her mother. "They're starving, so I made them something to eat." She looked over to where her father was asleep on the other side of the room. She wanted to ask her father about his turn to the Dark Side, but he was sleeping now, and she wasn't sure when another chance would present itself. Perhaps her mother could tell her what she needed to know. All Leia knew at this point was that she needed answers; the conflicting emotions within her were eating away at her, and she needed to get them under control. She was hoping that knowing the truth about her father would allow her to do that.

"Mother, what happened to him?" Leia asked at last without preamble.

Padmé turned and looked at her daughter. "What happened to whom?"

"You know who," Leia replied. "Him, my... my father," she said.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "I'm not sure what you're asking, Leia."

"Why did he turn to the Dark Side?" Leia asked. "What happened to turn him into Darth Vader?"

Padmé was taken aback by the question, and yet encouraged that Leia was expressing enough interest in her father to ask.

"It's a long story, Leia," Padmé replied at last. "Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"I think we both need to hear it, Mother," Luke said. "There's still so much we don't know about our father, about what happened to him."

"Very well," Padmé said, sitting back and collecting her thoughts. *Where do I begin?* She wondered.

“When I was 14, I was Queen of Naboo,” she began. “And my planet was under siege by the Trade Federation. The Republican Senate placed me under the care of a Jedi knight by the name of Qui-Gon Jinn and his apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi. While we were trying to escape from Naboo, our ship sustained damage that we were unable to repair, so we had to make an emergency landing. The closest inhabited planet was Tatooine. While there, Qui-Gon and I met a young slave boy. This young boy, who was 9 at the time, was the only human to ever compete and win in a pod race. He gave us his winnings so that we could buy the parts we needed to fix our ship. Qui-Gon also arranged for the young boy to be freed, for he saw in him unusually strong Force abilities, and wished to train him as a Jedi. So the young boy left his mother and came with us to Coruscant, and then on to Naboo, where he was instrumental in defeating the army of the Trade Federation. If you haven’t guessed it, the young boy was your father.”

“Father was a slave?” Luke asked incredulously.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, he and his mother both. After Qui-Gon was killed in a duel with a Sith, he went on to become the Padawan learner of Obi-Wan Kenobi. We didn’t see one another for ten years, and when we did, he had already become a very powerful Jedi, though still a padawan. But the changes in him had already begun; he had begun to suffer from nightmares about his mother, nightmares that turned out to be prophetic, for she died terribly at the hands of tusken raiders. But I’ve already told you about that,” she said. She sighed. “We were secretly married, your father and I. we couldn’t be apart, the connection between us was just too strong to ignore. It was so difficult though, for the Clone Wars had started by then, and he was away at the war for weeks, even months at a time. The war changed him, hardened him, but our love never wavered. And then one day he came home to learn that I was pregnant. He was so happy, so excited...” she stopped as the memory of that day came to her mind and she smiled. “I was scared, afraid of what it would mean when it became public knowledge that we were married, for we knew that we couldn’t keep our marriage secret once we had a child. But he wasn’t worried. He was determined to make it all work out, no matter what it took. But it wasn’t to be,” she concluded sadly, looking over at him.

“What happened?” Leia pressed her. “If he was so happy, and you were so in love, why did he leave you?”

“It wasn’t as simple as that, Leia,” Padmé continued. “The very day I told your father about my pregnancy, he began to have nightmares. This time, they were about me. He dreamed of me dying in childbirth. This dream terrified him so much that he became obsessed with it, for he was certain that it too was a portent of things to come. He was so determined to prevent his dream from coming true that he began to search for a way, any way, to keep me from dying. All the while, there was someone who was waiting for the right moment to move in, to capture his soul, someone who had befriended him and mentored him since he was a young boy, earning his trust and his friendship, while all the while planning to use him for his own nefarious ends: Palpatine.”

“Palpatine had designs on Father even when he was a boy?” Luke asked in amazement.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, it was obvious even when Anakin was a child that he was unusually gifted with the Force; they called him the Chosen One, the one that the Jedi had prophesized would bring balance to the Force, and destroy the Sith. Palpatine knew this too, and wanted

Anakin to be his apprentice, to use his tremendous powers for his own plans. In the end, that is exactly what he did.”

“But surely he saw what Palpatine was up to,” Leia put in. “why did he allow him to use him that way?”

“No one saw what Palpatine was up to, Leia,” Padmé replied. “Not until it was too late. No one suspected that he was a Sith, not even the Jedi Council. By the time it was discovered, it was too late. Palpatine had managed to convince your father that the only way to save me, to save us, was through knowledge of the Dark Side of the Force. That was how he lured him in finally. He used Anakin’s love of me, his fear of losing me, to destroy him.”

Luke and Leia sat in stunned silence for a moment, overwhelmed by what their mother had just told them. They had always known that Palpatine was evil incarnate; but to learn that he had been the instrument of their father’s destruction was shocking and disturbing.

“Obi-Wan tried to save him,” Padmé went on. “But it was too late; none of us could reach him, not even me. The Dark Side had taken hold of his soul, changing the wonderful, good man he was into the servant of evil that eventually became Darth Vader. He and Obi-Wan fought on Mustafar...” she stopped her, not wishing to remember that horrible day, not wishing to tell her children what their father had done to her on that day.

“That’s how he was injured, wasn’t it?” Luke asked quietly. “That’s why he was forced to wear the mask and breath suit all those years?”

Padmé nodded as an errant tear made its way down her cheek. “Yes,” she replied her voice no more than a whisper. She looked over at Anakin who was still sleeping. “I only learned of that recently; of how Obi-Wan mutilated him and left him to die in a fiery grave. I...I can’t even imagine the pain he must have suffered,” she added.

Leia sat in silence, too stunned to react. She had expected a much different story, a story of power, and greed and betrayal; not a tragic one, not a story where her father was the victim. *He was the villain, wasn’t he?? So why was it that she felt sorry for him? Why was it that her heart ached for the young slave boy who was so afraid of losing the one he loved that he gave up his soul to save her?* Leia could feel her throat tightening, the emotions welling up within her, threatening to overtake her.

“So you see,” Padmé said at last as she brushed away her tears. “Your father’s conversion to the Dark Side was not so simple. It was a conversion borne of pain, of fear, of anger both at himself and at the Jedi for not allowing him to save his mother, for not allowing us to live a normal life and be together. I see that now. I only wish I had seen it when it was happening to him. Maybe I could have prevented it from happening at all, maybe I could have saved him...” she stopped as her own emotions overwhelmed her, and she buried her face in her hands. Luke put his arms around her and held her close as she wept, his own tears falling freely now that he knew the tragic truth of his father’s past.

As for Leia, the truth of her father’s fall from Grace was not at all what she expected, and learning of it only added to her confusion and conflict. She looked over at the sleeping form of her father, trying to imagine the agony he must have gone through as he grappled with the decisions that lead him to the Dark Side. ***What do you know about pain?*** She had asked him mere days ago. *What indeed...* her father knew more of pain than anyone she knew, and it

made her feel guilty that she had questioned that. *But I didn't know... I didn't know what I do now... how could I have known?* And in a moment of clarity a thought struck her: *how could **he** have known?* Leia closed her eyes as she felt the tears rolling down her face. She did nothing to prevent them now.

Chapter 59

CHAPTER 59

Leia had finally drifted off to sleep. Padmé and Luke, who had slept earlier, had joined Han and Chewbacca in the galley to have something to eat. Leia was exhausted from all the worry and stress that had consumed her recently. Now that Han was safe, she was able to relax and give her body the rest it so sorely needed.

It wasn't long before Leia's sleep was invaded by the tortured images of a nightmare. But it was not her nightmare, but rather that of her father. The images were so intense that his mind projected them, encroaching upon her unconscious mind.

Sulfuric fumes filled the air, and the heat was unbearable. It was difficult to breathe, and yet the pursuit continued. Running, always moving, hatred and anger propelling him forward as he pursued his foe, the one who had once been his best friend, his brother, his mentor... Kenobi... the pursuit lead them to the river of fire, the heat rising off of it in great, sickening waves, causing the sweat to run down his back and plaster his long hair to his neck and brow. Leaping, the Darkness flowing through him as effortlessly as the river below flowed over the planet's surface, he declared an end to the pursuit. But then, the agony, the searing, mind numbing pain that rocketed through his body, as the laser blade of his foe sliced through his legs and his arm. Mutilated, tumbling down the slope toward the fiery river, the hatred searing his mind, filling him with anger, with utter blackness... and then the fire...

Leia shook herself from the dream, forcing herself awake, her heart pounding within her. She sat up quickly, her body bathed in sweat. *What was that???* she wondered anxiously. And then she knew. Looking over at her father, she knew that it was his dream she was seeing, his nightmare, his *memories*.

Leia got off the cot and rushed over to her father. He was clearly agitated.

"Wake up," Leia said, sitting on the side of the cot and shaking his shoulder. "You're having a nightmare, wake up!"

Anakin did not respond right away, and Leia was forced to shake him more vigorously, taking both shoulders in her hands.

"Wake up!!" she shouted, shaking him forcefully. "Father, wake up!"

Anakin's eyes snapped open, and he looked up, right into the eyes of his daughter. He was discombobulated, the images from his mind still fresh, the sight of his daughter and the look on her face all adding to his confusion.

"Leia??" he said.

"You were having a nightmare," she said. "I... I saw it. I don't know how, but I saw what you were dreaming. It was..." she stopped as the horror of what she had witnessed crashed over her, preventing her from speaking.

“Mustafar,” Anakin said. “I was dreaming about Mustafar.”

Leia nodded. “Mother told us about what happened to you there,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I had no idea... I can’t even imagine...” she stopped again as the grief overwhelmed her.

Anakin sat up, surprised by his daughter’s compassion. “She did?” he said simply.

Leia nodded. “Yes,” she replied. “She told us about what Palpatine did to you, how you tried to save her, how you dreamed of her dying... all of it. I wanted to know why you had turned to the Dark Side, I needed to know.”

Anakin nodded. “And now that you do?” he asked, trying to see what was in her heart. “Does it make any difference?”

“Yes,” she replied quietly. “It makes all the difference. I had no idea that you had suffered so, that you turned to the Dark Side out of fear of losing Mother. You turned to the Dark Side because you loved her, and it destroyed you,” she said, the tragic irony of it striking her hard.

“Because I loved all of you,” he replied, “You, your brother and your mother. I would have done anything to save you all; only I was too foolish to realize that this fear was what Palpatine used to lure me to the Darkness. He used me all along, Leia; since I was a child, he manipulated me, just waiting for the day when he could use me to control the galaxy. And I let him do it. I let him use me, I let him destroy me and our family,” he said, the self-loathing he had lived with for so long rearing up again.

Leia shook her head. “You didn’t know,” she said, realizing this for the first time. “Mother knows that now, and so do I. You didn’t know what he was doing to you, no one did, not until it was too late to do anything about it.”

Anakin shook his head, his frown deepening. “That’s no excuse,” he replied. “I should have known, I should have seen what he was doing before it was too late. I never should have listened to him. I lost everything because of him, everything that meant anything to me, everyone I loved.”

“But you destroyed him,” Leia reminded him. “Remember?? You killed him and saved us all. You avenged our family, Father.”

Anakin was astonished by the change in his daughter, and part of him wondered if he was actually still asleep and dreaming it all. Could it be true? Was she finally seeing the truth of what had happened all those years ago? Was she finally able to put aside the ugly past that he and she shared?

“I suppose so,” he replied at last. “I only wish it hadn’t taken 22 years for me to do it. So many wasted years, so much time gone by that will never be recaptured....the regrets are so heavy, Leia, so crushing. I would give anything to change it all,” he said softly, his eyes cast down to the floor.

Leia nodded. “Yes, I know you would,” she replied. “But there’s nothing that can be done to change the past. All we can do is build the future, and do all we can to make up for the lost time.”

Anakin looked up at his daughter. “Is that what you want, Leia?” he asked.

“Yes, I do,” she replied. “I want that more than anything.”

Anakin smiled, feeling as though an enormous weight had been lifted from his heart. “I can’t tell you how that makes me feel, Leia,” he said, reaching out tentatively to take her hand.

She looked down at her small hand enveloped in his huge one. The physical connection only strengthened the emotional one that she had been denying for weeks now. She looked up at him again, relieved to at last be able to acknowledge that connection, to nurture it and explore it. “I think I know,” she replied.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, tears springing to his eyes. “So sorry for everything, Leia.”

Leia nodded. “I know,” she said softly, her own tears coming again. “I am too, for all the hurtful, insensitive things I’ve said... for not listening, for not believing in you.”

Anakin shook his head. “You have nothing to apologize for, Leia,” he said. “Nothing. I deserved your scorn, your anger.”

“My anger, perhaps,” she conceded. “But that anger didn’t give me the right to say the things I said,” she added, looking down at their hands again. “I suppose I was hurting, and I wanted to hurt you as well. That was wrong, and I apologize. I didn’t know what had happened to you... I just didn’t know.”

Anakin brought his hand to her face and lifted her chin so that she was looking at him. “It’s time to put the past aside. If we don’t, our family will never heal.”

Leia nodded. “You’re right,” she replied. “I know we both have many scars from the past, but perhaps we can help one another, you and I. I know we haven’t got off to the best start, but maybe we can start again. What do you think?”

Anakin smiled. “I think that’s a fine idea,” he said. “I must be the luckiest man in the galaxy to have been given a second chance at life. Thank you, Leia. Thank you for giving me that chance.”

Across the room, Padmé and Luke watched as father and daughter embraced for the first time. Luke smiled and looked as his mother.

“I knew she would come around in time,” he said quietly. “I just knew it.”

Padmé smiled. “I wasn’t so sure, Luke; but I’m very glad that you were right. Now perhaps our family can be whole again.”

Luke nodded. *Yes, now we can be a real family, at last.*

Chapter 60

CHAPTER 60

"We have entered the Coruscant System, sir," Piett announced as he entered the passenger lounge.

Anakin looked up. "Very good," he said. "Have you sent word to the palace to prepare for our arrival?"

"Yes I have," Piett replied.

"How did you explain your absence all this time?" Luke asked.

"Vacation," Anakin replied simply with a smile.

"Good idea," Han replied. "Even the emperor needs a break, right?"

"Exactly," Anakin replied.

"I took the liberty of bringing along your cloaks," Piett told Anakin and Padmé. "So that upon your return you can be disguised."

"Good thinking, Firmus," Padmé replied. "We were in such a hurry to leave that we didn't even think of that."

"That is Piett's area of expertise," Anakin commented. "Thinking of everything."

Piett smiled a little self consciously. "I am here to serve you, sir, and you too my lady, in whatever capacity I can. May I ask how you will be explaining the presence of your children in the imperial palace now, sir?"

Anakin looked at his son and daughter. "Well, I think we can pass Leia off as Padmé's handmaiden," he replied. "As for Luke..."

"I'll be your apprentice," Luke spoke up. "After all, everyone but us gathered here thinks you're still a Sith lord, right?"

Anakin nodded.

"Well, then you need an apprentice," Luke replied. "That will be me."

"Actually, I was hoping to have two apprentices," Anakin replied, looking from Luke to Leia. "In reality at least. In appearance, however I think Luke's idea is a sound one."

"You want to train us both?" Leia asked in surprise.

"Why does that surprise you?" Anakin asked. "You have already manifested latent Force abilities; it is time to hone those abilities. Unless you are not interested in becoming a Jedi."

Leia sat for a moment, thinking about what her father was proposing. Did she really possess the abilities needed to be a Jedi? Was it truly possible??

“Perhaps Leia needs some time to think about it,” Padmé suggested. “That is a big commitment, after all.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, it certainly is,” he agreed. “But if we are to rebuild the Jedi Order, then we will need all the help we can get.”

“I will give it some thought, Father,” Leia replied at last. ‘It’s a big decision. In the mean time, I would be happy to be your hand maiden, Mother,’ she added, turning to her mother. “It will be a good way to hide while being close to the both of you at the same time.”

“What about me?” Han asked. “I’m assuming you guys have figured out what part I’m going to play in this.”

“We have indeed,” Anakin replied. “I thought that you and Chewbacca could serve as my heads of security.”

Han nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I think we could do that, eh Chewie?”

Chewbacca barked in response. (Which translated would mean, “Indubitably, my good fellow.”)

“Then it’s all settled,” Anakin said. “When we return to Coruscant, we will all have our parts to play in this grand charade.”

“I only hope that Mon Mothma doesn’t end up blowing our cover,” Leia muttered. “She’s bound to be angry. She could really cause trouble for us.”

“You’re assuming that she knows the true identities of Emperor and Empress Vader,” Luke pointed out. “There’s no way of linking Anakin Skywalker to Darth Vader.”

“True,” Leia replied. “Still, she can be very resourceful. All I’m saying is we’d better be wary of her.”

“Of course,” Anakin agreed. “We cannot afford to underestimate anyone, least of all her.”

It was well into the night when they made their descent to Coruscant. Using a secret access, they entered the palace. As it was the middle of the night, there were no servants about, which made it easier to make an unnoticed entry.

“Quite the place you’ve got here,” Han observed, looking around in amazement at the grand establishment.

“It’s rather large,” Anakin replied. “Too large if you ask me.”

“Well we have plenty of room, that’s one advantage,” Padmé put in. “Here, let me show you where you can sleep.”

Padmé showed the four newcomers to rooms of their own, and it wasn’t long before everyone was settled in and sound asleep.

“It feels nice to have our children under the same roof, doesn’t it?” Padmé said as she snuggled up against her husband.

Anakin wrapped his arms around her. “Yes, it does,” he agreed. “Our work isn’t finished yet though, we still have to explain their presence here, and find a way to disguise them. All

of them.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that’s true. I only hope that Leia’s feared about Mon Mothma are unfounded; if she has managed to figure out who you are, then it could create some serious trouble for all of us.”

Anakin sighed. “I’ve had my share of trouble, Padmé; all I want is to enjoy a quiet life now.”

“We have a long way to go before we can do that, Ani,” she replied. “But now that we’re all together, it won’t seem so difficult. Luke and Leia will be very valuable in our mission to dismantle the Empire.”

“Yes, they will,” Anakin replied, kissing her brow softly. “But let’s talk about this another time,” he added.

Padmé smiled. “Why, is there something else on your mind?”

“You could say so,” he replied, pulling her closer.

Arili Roye reached the command ship of the Rebel Alliance within 24 hours of losing the Millennium Falcon. She did not look forward to reporting her failure to Mon Mothma, especially since her two comrades had been killed. Mothma did not like failure, and would not be impressed with the loss of Solo and his ship. More disturbing, however, would be the report that it was Luke Skywalker who had issued the ultimatum to back away from the Falcon. *Skywalker was now on the side of the Empire*, Arili realized in astonishment. She had not known him personally, but there wasn’t a being in the Alliance who didn’t know who he was or how important he was to the Rebel cause. How could he have turned against the Alliance? It didn’t make any sense. Still, it was true, and it was up to Arili to report it to her commanding officers.

“Go on in,” the guard at the door told her. “They’re expecting you.”

Arili nodded and entered the room, taking a deep breath to brace herself.

“Come in, Roye,” Mon Mothma said as she saw the young pilot enter the room. “You’re alone?”

Arili nodded. “Yes m’am,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m the only one to survive the pursuit.”

Mon Mothma frowned. “What are you telling me, Roye? That Solo destroyed the other pilots?”

Arili shook her head. “No, it wasn’t Solo,” she replied. “We had him cornered, three of us, me, Anraeth Passik and Deke Bujold.”

“Three against one, and you lost him??” Mothma demanded angrily.

“Well, it wasn’t three against one but rather two against three,” Arili explained. “You see, an Imperial ship appeared, a Delta-class JV-7 shuttle, and they destroyed Passik and Bujold..”

“JV-7?” Mon Mothma interrupted. “That’s the ship used to transport the emperor...” she stopped as she began to put the pieces together.

“There’s something else you should know,” Arili said. “Luke Skywalker was on board that ship, I’m certain of it. He was the one who ordered us to back away from the Falcon.”

Mon Mothma’s frown deepened as absorbed this disturbing piece of news. *Skywalker was on board the emperor’s ship... that could only mean one thing.*

“Tell me everything that happened, Roye, and don’t spare any detail, no matter how small. I need to know everything.”—

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Chapter 61

CHAPTER 61

The royal household was curious about the newcomers, but knew better than to ask questions. They simply accepted what the emperor and empress had told them: the young woman was a native of the empress' home planet, and had come to serve her as a hand maiden. The younger of the two men was a Sith apprentice; that alone was enough to stop them from asking any further questions. As for the older man and the wookiee, the official word was that they were security experts, and that they were to serve as the head of the empress' personal guard. It all made sense, and there was no reason for anyone to suspect the truth of the newcomers' identities. Of course, the household staff was made up of droids, and droids are incapable of thinking; a lucky thing in this instance.

In the lower level of the great estate, Anakin had arranged for a gymnasium to be set up. It was his hope to train his children there, with the goal of one day rebuilding the Jedi Order. Luke had already shown great skill and the same natural abilities as his father.

As for Leia, Anakin hoped that in time she would come to accept her heritage and join her twin in the reforming of the Jedi Order. For the moment she seemed to be too consumed with her relationship with Han Solo to show much interest in anything else. This annoyed Anakin, for he felt that his daughter's latent Force abilities were going to waste so long as she remained untrained.

"You can't push her, Ani," Padmé reminded him as she sat at her mirror brushing out her long tresses. "It has to be her decision."

"I know that," Anakin replied, watching his wife from their bed. "But it just annoys me that she is paying so much attention to Solo; I'm getting a little tired of it."

Padmé smiled and looked at her husband's reflection in the mirror. "Imagine that, someone who is too much in love to care about anything else. Remind you of anyone?"

Anakin looked thoughtful for a moment, and then smiled as he realized that it was he that she was talking about. "Well, that was different," he said at last. "I never ignored my Jedi calling. Leia is my daughter; that calling is as much a part of her as it is me, or Luke. I would just hate to see her waste her abilities, Padmé."

"I know you would," she concurred, setting down her brush. "But now isn't the time to start telling her how to live her life, Anakin. The two of you have only just begun to build your relationship; if you start to get too pushy with her, she'll only get her back up. You know what she's like; she's just like you."

Anakin laughed. "Yes, I suppose you're right there," He admitted. "Alright, I leave her alone, for now at least. But if the Jedi Order is to be rebuilt, then I will need her help, Padmé."

"I know," she said, standing up and walking over to the bed. "And in time I'm sure she will come to realize how important her role is in the reformation of the Order. Just be patient

with her, Ani. That's all I'm saying."

Anakin nodded as he watched his wife climb into bed beside him. "Patience has never been one of my strong suits, you know that. But I will try."

Padmé smiled and leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek. "That's all I ask, Anakin."

"For you? I can do it, Padmé," Anakin replied, taking her face in his hands.

"Thank you, Ani," she replied, snuggling up next to him. "I will miss you and Luke when you leave in the morning," she said.

Anakin kissed the top of her head. "I will miss you too," he replied. "But it is important that we make our presence felt in the galaxy. It has been nearly a month since I removed the regional governors. It is time to check up on them to make sure they are following my orders."

"After the example you made of Orrick, I don't think they would dare not follow them," Padmé comments. "But I understand what you're saying. It will be nice for you to have Luke with you."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it will be," he agreed. "Like a dream come true having my son at my side," he added with a smile.

"I'm sure," Padmé replied. "Leia and I have our own work to do. It's so exciting to be creating a new senate, Anakin. I'm so happy you decided to reinstitute it; it will bring the galaxy one step to democracy again."

"It will," Anakin agreed. "And who better to spear head that transition than you, my love?" he commented with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "With the help of our daughter," she replied. "I am very excited about working with Leia on this. She already has so many wonderful ideas; I can tell she is as thrilled about this as I am."

"It seems the future of the galaxy is in good hands," Anakin said. "I only hope that the Alliance doesn't cause any trouble for us."

Padmé frowned. "To tell you the truth, Anakin, I'm rather surprised they haven't done anything to try to get Luke and Leia back. It's been two weeks now since we freed them and it doesn't look like they have made any attempts to get them back or even find out where they are."

"We don't know that for sure," Anakin told her. "They may have been searching for them all this time, we wouldn't necessarily know it. Besides, they wouldn't even beginning to know where to look. They don't know we are the empress and emperor, after all."

"I'm not so sure about that," she replied. "Leia and Luke seemed to think that Mon Mothma was getting close to piecing it all together. If she does..."

"If she does than we'll have a huge problem on our hands," Anakin concurred. "Let's just hope she isn't clever enough to figure it out, at least not until we've accomplished what we have set out to do."

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that’s all we can do. I suppose. So long as they are unable to make a connection between you and the galactic emperor, then we should be alright.”

Anakin nodded, but inwardly he felt uneasy. The thought of that last pilot escaping had been eating away at him for the past two weeks. At the time it seemed that he was simply demonstrating the compassion that a Jedi Knight was supposed to possess; but now it seemed that he had made an error in judgment. If that pilot had reported back to the Rebel Alliance that an Imperial royal shuttle had saved Han Solo, it would undoubtedly raise their suspicions. *I was foolish to allow that pilot to get away...* he reproached himself. *If they make the connection to us, it will be my fault...*

“Ani? Are you okay?” Padmé asked, looking up at him.

He shook himself from his musings and looked down at his wife. “Yes, I’m fine,” he said, forcing himself to smile. “Just thinking of how much I will miss you over the next few weeks.”

Padmé smiled and moved closer to him. “I will miss you too,” she said softly. “I will miss this,” she added, taking his face in her hands and kissing him.

Anakin kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her closer to him, so that their bodies were pressed against one another. Slowly he pulled at the fabric of her nightgown, pulling it up over her.

Chapter 62

CHAPTER 62

"Please contact us as soon as you can, Ani," Padmé said to her husband as she and Leia said their goodbyes to Anakin and Luke.

"We will," Anakin assured her. "Of course we'll be in the Outer Rim, Padmé; communications will be difficult."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I realize that," she replied. "It's just that we'll be anxious to hear from you both."

Luke smiled at his mother. "We'll find a way, Mother," he told her. "Don't worry."

Padmé smiled and hugged her son. "Thank you, Luke. Take good care of one another."

"We will," Luke assured her. "You and Leia do the same."

"Have a safe trip, Father," Leia told Anakin as he hugged her.

"We will," he replied. "With Chewbacca with us, we're bound to be fine."

Leia nodded with a smile, and then turned to her brother to say her goodbyes to him.

"Don't worry, Padmé," Anakin told her as he held her in his arms. "We are well protected."

"I know that," she replied as she pressed her cheek against his chest. "I suppose I just hate being parted from you. It will be a long month."

Anakin nodded. He looked down at his wife, smiling as he did so.

"What is it?" she asked, seeing the thoughtful look in his eyes.

He shook his head. "Nothing at all," he told her, keeping his thoughts to himself for the moment. "I love you, Padmé. I will see you soon."

She nodded. "I love you too, Anakin," she replied. "Have a safe trip."

Anakin, his son and Chewbacca made their way to the Outer Rim territories, where the corruption had been most rampant. They began at the Elrood Sector.

"I can't believe that the Empire has allowed the crime in this sector to go unchecked for so long," Anakin commented as he and Luke made their approach to the capital world of Elrood.

Luke looked at his father. "Palpatine didn't care about that?"

Anakin shook his head. "No, the system is poor, and relatively unimportant, therefore the inhabitants are deemed unworthy of protection from criminal elements, including their own leaders. Well, that is about to change."

Anakin and Luke were met on the landing platform by the governor and the Imperial officers who were charged with running the enormous ore refinery located on the planet.

“Lord Vader,” the governor, a weasely little creature named Shydark, bowed low and obsequiously as Anakin and Luke reached the end of the landing ramp. “It is indeed an honor to have you visit our humble world.”

“We are not here to pay you a visit, Governor,” Anakin pronounced, stopping in front of the single-eyed creature. “I assure you, this is not a pleasure trip.”

Shydark frowned, or what appeared to be a frown at this comment.

“Is there something amiss, my lord?” he asked nervously.

“Obviously you were not present at the Imperial palace 5 weeks ago,” Luke put in. “Or you would realize why we were here.”

The governor turned his attention to the smaller man at the emperor’s side. His face, like Vader’s was hidden from view by a large cloak.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” Shydark remarked smoothly, looking Luke over with undisguised mistrust.

“This is Darth Vengeance,” Anakin replied, hating to use a Sith name to introduce his beloved son. “My apprentice.”

“I see,” Shydark replied, looking at Luke with renewed respect. “I welcome you, Lord Vengeance.”

Luke only nodded, feeling strange at being called the Sith name he and his father had thought up only a short time ago.

“I am glad you gentlemen are here too,” Anakin said, addressing the other men for the first time. “I will require reports from all of you.”

“Reports, my lord?” one of the officers spoke up.

“Yes,” Anakin replied. “Financial reports. I have long suspected that there was a great deal of embezzlement going on at this facility, and I mean to put an end to it if it means replacing every last one of you.”

The men looked at one another with alarm.

“Gentlemen?” Luke said, holding out his arm. “Lead the way.”

Mon Mothma had become virtually obsessed with learning all she could about Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala. She had been utterly shocked to learn that they were married, and wondered how it was possible for them to keep such a secret for so long. She remembered Padmé well during the times before the Empire, how instrumental she had been in the beginnings of what would eventually become the Rebel Alliance, and had even visited her home on more than one occasion. How was it possible that she did not know that Padmé was married to someone as famous as Anakin Skywalker?? She understood the need for secrecy, for the Jedi were forbidden to marry; but it seemed incredible that they had managed to pull it off without anyone finding out. *And they had children too... Luke Skywalker and*

Leia Organa were their children... but Leia had been the daughter of Bail and Breha Organa of Alderaan... why wasn't she a Skywalker too? And where had Padmé and Anakin been all these years? So many questions, so few answers; it made her head swim just to think of it.

Yet, deep inside her, a nagging feeling would not go away; *Luke Skywalker had been on board the Imperial ship that had destroyed two rebel pilots...* he may have even been the one to shoot them from the sky. Or maybe it was Leia... *what was it all about? Why were they on board that ship? There had to be a connection, just as there had to be a reason why Anakin Skywalker was using a red light saber...* Somehow Anakin Skywalker had survived the Jedi purges, and somehow his disappearance coincided with the appearance of the galaxy's most sinister agent, Darth Vader. Was it possible that the two were one? This thought had entered her mind before, but she had refused to believe it; but now that she had learned of Luke Skywalker's presence on board an imperial vessel, it was getting harder and harder to discount. The more she thought of it, the more sense it made. It explained where Skywalker was for so long, why Padmé had not been heard from in two decades, why Leia, their daughter, had been adopted into a different family, and why Luke, their son, had grown up on a back water planet on the Outer Rim, far from the Imperial influence. *They were all hiding from him... hiding from Vader...* So why were they now willing to acknowledge their relationship to him? There was obviously far more to this situation than she knew. Now that Luke and Leia were gone, she would need to find answers elsewhere. Who would tell her what she needed to know? Who could she trust? The Skywalker children were no longer trustworthy, and their father had been, or still was, Darth Vader; that left only one person. Mon Mothma only hoped that her hope would not be misplaced, and that somehow she would find a way to secure the trust of the one who could furnish her with the answers she needed: Padmé Amidala.

Chapter

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Chapter 63

CHAPTER 63

"It looks just as I remember," Padmé said as she, Leia and Han stood in the enormous domed senate building.

Leia nodded. "You were part of the senate when it actually had some say in the galaxy," she commented. "During my tenure it was almost powerless. I think Palpatine only kept it alive as long as she did for appearance only. It was the last vestige of democracy. Once it was gone, any pretense of his reign being anything but a total dictatorship was swept away."

"Which is what it was all along," Han put in. "He didn't fool anybody."

"Maybe not," Padmé replied. "But he certainly managed to convince a lot of people that the creation the Empire was for the good of the galaxy. I will never forget that day, the day that democracy died."

The Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire, for a safe and secure society....

So this is how liberty dies, with thunderous applause.

"But we're going to reverse all the damage that he did," Leia reminded her mother, squeezing her hand. "We are going to witness the rebirth of democracy, of freedom."

Padmé looked at her daughter, giving her hand a squeeze. "Yes, we are," she agreed.

"Won't Mon Mothma be shocked when she finds out what the two of you are cooking up?" Han commented with a grin.

"I for one am looking forward to an apology from that woman," Leia replied. "She certainly owes Luke and I one."

"Don't hold your breath, sweetheart," Han muttered.

Padmé smiled. "I just hope she doesn't do anything to derail our efforts, or those of Luke and Anakin."

"She hasn't done anything so far," Han pointed out. "And it's been more than three weeks since we sprung Luke and Leia from the command ship."

"That doesn't mean anything," Leia replied with a frown. "And you know it. She's very patient, Han. She could be just biding her time, waiting for the right moment, the right opportunity to make her move. We cannot discount the possibility that our every move is being watched."

Padmé felt the skin on the back of her neck tingle at Leia's statement. She hoped her daughter was wrong, but intuitively she felt otherwise. *I wish Ani were here*, she found herself thinking. Since he had left, she had not been herself. She was happy to be working on this project with daughter, for it kept her mind occupied. She knew that otherwise she would do

nothing but worry about Lake and Anakin. The only news they'd received of them was on the Imperial Holonet, which reported that Emperor Vader and his new apprentice, Darth Vengeance, had cleaned house on Elrood. Their actions had sent shock waves throughout the quadrant, sending governors scrambling to get their affairs in order, some of them choosing to vacate their office completely rather than face the wrath of the new emperor.

It bothered Padmé to hear her son referred to as Darth Vengeance, even though it was but a ruse.

"Mother? Are you okay?"

Padmé shook herself from her thoughts.

"Yes, yes I'm fine," She replied.

"You just looked so far away," Leia said. "Are you feeling alright?"

Padmé sighed. "Yes, I'm fine," She repeated. "Just a little tired, that's all."

Leia nodded, secretly worried about her mother. She had noticed her fatigue, and worried that her mother was not sleeping well in the absence of her father and Luke. The connection between Leia's parents was truly remarkable even after so many years spent apart. It almost seemed as though they were a part of one another. *No wonder he fell into such Darkness without her*, Leia reflected.

"Let's go home," Padmé said at last. "It's getting late, and I'm hoping we'll have word from Anakin and Luke tonight."

"Good idea," said Han. "Besides, I'm starving."

. "When *aren't* you starving?" Leia teased him.

Han shrugged. "When I'm eating" he replied with a grin.

Leia and Padmé laughed as they walked out.

"They've left the Elrood sector and the report is that they are headed for the Allied Tion sector."

Mon Mothma nodded her understanding. "And they have been away from the capital for how long?"

"Three weeks so far, commander," the rebel informant reported. "Our sources say it will be at least another month before they return."

"Yes, the emperor seems rather busy in the Outer Rim," She commented, more to herself than the man in front of her. She looked up at her comrades. "Maybe now is the time to make our move, gentlemen. With Vader in the Outer Rim, weeks away from home."

Reikan nodded his head. "Yes, that would make sense," he concurred. "I'm still not so sure about this plan of your, Mothma," he added. "It sounds far too risky to me."

"And to me," Ackbar spoke up. "We don't know what the fall out of this could be; it could make this much worse."

Mon Mothma frowned, her cheeks growing pink with anger. “If either of you can come up with a better plan, then I’d be most pleased to hear it.”

Reikan and Ackbar looked at one another.

“You don’t know for certain that your theory is correct,” Reikan spoke up at last. “Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader the same person?? It seems ludicrous to me. Skywalker was a hero, not a traitor. What would make him become a Sith?”

“I don’t know,” Mothma replied. ‘That is what I intend to find out,’ she replied. “The coincidences are just too great to ignore, gentlemen. Anakin Skywalker’s disappearance coincides precisely with the emergence of Darth Vader; not to mention all the business with Luke and Leia. Why is it so hard to believe?”

“It’s not that,” Ackbar said. “If you are wrong, just imagine the repercussions. Vader is not a man to be trifled with, Mothma. He will hunt us down and destroy us, you can be sure of that.”

“Well what do you suggest then?” she retorted hotly. ‘That we just ignore the fact that our two strongest allies are now Imperial agents? That one of them shot down and killed two of our pilots? I can’t ignore those facts, I won’t ignore them! I need answers, and I mean to get them by whatever means necessary.’ She stopped and looked at her two comrades, seeing their unease. “If either of you have a better plan, I’d be happy to hear it.”

Ackbar and Reikan remained silent.

“Just as I thought,” Mothma said. “I tell you what; I will wait one more week. If you can come up with a better plan, then I’ll listen. But if not, we will proceed as planned. We don’t have time to waste, gentlemen. Are we in agreement then?”

Reluctantly Ackbar and Reikan consented, secretly knowing that no matter what plan they came up with, Mon Mothma would push for her own agenda. She was on a mission, and both of them knew that when she was, it was best to step out of the way. *One week they reflect. One week to avert a potential disaster...*

Chapter

7

Chapter 64

CHAPTER 64

Anakin and Luke had arrived at the Allied Tion sector amid a political coup d'état. The governor had recently been assassinated, in light of the emperor's recent announcement. There had been rampant corruption in the sector for years for the late governor had been utterly arrogant, greedy and stupid; a bad combination. Anakin and Luke had been shocked by the upheaval that met them upon their arrival at the capital world of Jaminere; yet they made certain not to let their disdain of the brutal slaying of the imperial official be too obvious.

"I'm afraid our stay here might be longer than we had originally anticipated," Anakin told his son as they sat in the privacy of the quarters that had been arranged for them. "We have a big mess here to straighten out."

Luke nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it sure seems that way. Still, I can't really say I'm surprised at the way things turned out here, given the late governor's record."

"No, neither am I," Anakin concurred. "The Outer Rim territories were assigned to the bottom of the barrel when it came to administrators; Palpatine didn't really care about these worlds, just what material wealth their addition to the Empire meant."

"What if one of these planets decides that they don't want to be a part of the Empire any more?" Luke asked. "What then? Are you willing to let them secede rather than force them to stay?"

Anakin sighed. "That is a good question, son," he said. "The Clone Wars began over that very issue; worlds that didn't want to belong to the Republic anymore banding together to fight against the establishment. I have no desire to start a war; yet, if I allow worlds to leave the Empire, it will weaken my position as emperor."

"I understand," Luke replied. "I just hope it doesn't come down to that."

"No, neither do I," Anakin replied with a frown. "Still, the formation of the senate should entice worlds to stay, and assure them that things will change under my rule."

"I wonder how things are going back home," Luke commented. "I know how excited Mother and Leia were about getting started with that project."

Anakin smiled. "Yes, your mother is a natural in the political realm. There is no one better for this task than her." Anakin thought of his wife, realizing that it had been weeks since he had seen her now. 'I think I will try to get a message to her tonight,' he told Luke at last. "I know your mother, and I know she'll be worried until she hears from us."

Luke smiled. "Yeah, I agree. At this distance it will be a while before she gets it though," he reminded his father.

Anakin nodded. "I realize that," he said. "But better late than never, right?"

“True,” Luke agreed. “I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear from you.”

“I’m sure she will too,” Anakin replied.

Padmé arrived home late one evening to find a message waiting for her from Anakin. Due to the distance, the message had been prerecorded, which disappointed her somewhat; she was hoping to speak to him live. Yet, even this was better than no contact at all. She sat down at her desk and activated the holo projector to view the message.

Hello my love, Anakin began. I hope that this message finds you and Leia well. I am speaking to you from the planet Jaminere in the Allied Tion Sector. Things here are rather unsettled at the moment. The imperial governor, Haken Katana, was executed by the people of this world four days before our arrival. Obviously he had made a lot of enemies, and the situation had reached an untenable point. While I don’t agree with the harshness of their solution, it has actually made our job somewhat easier. We are leaving a team of experts, or so they call themselves, he added with a grin to help the provisional government reach stabilization and begin to function as a democratic body. The people here seem quite excited about the idea of a senate, and are willing to consider remaining in the Empire with that end in mind. I miss you both, as does Luke; I hope that we will be home soon, but I somehow doubt it. The northern quadrant is massive, and, as you know Padmé, the Other Rim was greatly neglected during Palpatine’s reign. I hope to leave it in a far better state than when I arrived. I hope that your project is going well; knowing you both I’m sure it is well under way by now. I’d better go now; some sort of formal dinner is waiting for us. You know how much I love that sort of thing. I love you both.

Padmé sighed as Anakin’s image faded out. *I hope that we will be home soon, but I somehow doubt it...* the words stuck in her mind, making her mood even bluer. She was spending a great deal of time alone in the evenings, as Leia and Han continued their courtship and would often don disguises and go into the city for the evening for a diversion. Padmé couldn’t blame them; they were young after all, and in love. She remembered what that felt like, only she and Anakin had never dared set foot in public together, never once went to dinner, never went dancing... so much they had sacrificed to keep their secret. *And what ended up happening in the end?* She reflected sadly. *We spent half of our lives estranged...*

Padmé stood up, trying to shake the malaise from her spirit. *They will be alright*, she kept telling herself. *They will be home soon, and they will be alright.* That thought, however, was not enough to dispel the gloom she felt as she walked through the enormous palace alone, with only droids to keep her company. She felt certain that Leia would stay home to keep her company if she knew how despondent Padmé was feeling lately; but Padmé wouldn’t dream of letting on to her or anyone how she was feeling. *You’re being foolish*, she admonished herself repeatedly. *Don’t be such a baby.*

“Is there anything I might get for you, my lady?” the protocol droid RX79 asked as it saw Padmé leaving the study.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “I think I’m going to turn in early again. It’s been a long day.”

“Very good, my lady,” the droid returned. “Have a pleasant sleep.”

“Thank you,” Padmé replied as she ascended the stairs. Once in the enormous bed chamber that she shared with Anakin, she sat down on the edge of the bed. *What is wrong with me?* She asked herself. It was more than missing Anakin and Luke; that much was certain. Part of her wondered if she ought to consult a medical droid, to ensure that there was nothing physically wrong with her; but then Leia would catch wind of it, and that would open up too many questions. *No, this is just me missing Anakin, that’s all...* she told herself as she began to undress. *I’m afraid of losing him again... I’m afraid that he’ll return to the Dark Side, and this time take our son with him... is that it?* She didn’t even know for sure if that was it.

Climbing into bed a short time later, Padmé reached over and laid her hand where Anakin normally slept, frustrated to feel tears filling her eyes. *I miss you Ani*, she thought to herself, half wondering if he would hear her somehow. *Please come home soon.*

Anakin woke up with a start, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. He had been dreaming of his wife, and sensed that she was deeply troubled. Anakin sat up in bed, his mind focusing on her, reaching out to her in the vastness of space. He smiled in the dark. “I miss you too, angel,” he said softly. “Sleep well.”

Chapter 65

Yeah, yeah, I know this one is short... but you know there will be more soon. □

CHAPTER 65

“Lord Vader, can you give us any details about Governor Katana?”

“He is dead. Next question?”

Luke smirked deep inside his hood at his father’s adept handling of the media. So far no one had overstepped the limits that the new emperor had clearly delineated at the last press conference. No one wanted to end up like *that*; so they worded their questions carefully, which amused Anakin and his son no end.

“Lord Vader, we’ve heard rumors that you will be visiting Arkanis next. Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“Weill you be removing the Hutt influence from that sector?”

“We plan to have a....chat with Jabba,” Luke spoke up. “Whether he will cooperate or not remains to be seen.”

“What will happen if he doesn’t?”

Luke and Anakin looked at one another, or at least faced one another as they considered this. Finally Anakin answered.

“We shall do whatever is necessary,” he said at last. “The criminal element in the Arkanis sector, particularly on the planet Tatooine, has been thriving for many years. The Hutts have accumulated a great deal of wealth from the subjugation of others. That is about to end. No one will make money from enslaving another being while I am emperor.”

Luke smiled grimly, knowing what a sore topic this was for his father. Having endured a life of slavery as a child, it was natural for Anakin to feel antipathy towards those who perpetrated the slave trade.

“Lord Vader, is...”

“That is all,” Anakin said, ending the man’s sentence and the press conference abruptly. He and Luke turned and left the room, leaving the reporters to wonder what the emperor had in store for the notorious Jabba the Hutt.

“That doesn’t sound like the Darth Vader I know,” Admiral Ackbar commented as he turned away from the holonet broadcast to face his companions.

General Reikan shook his head. “No, I was thinking the same thing,” he replied. “Clearly something is going on, something we know nothing about.”

“Is it possible that Darth Vader has once again become Anakin Skywalker” Jan Dodonna suggested. “In more than just the physical sense? Are we overlooking the obvious here?”

Mon Mothma frowned, not replying immediately, even though she knew that the comment was directed at her.

“And what might *the obvious* be?” she asked at last, turning her eyes to Dodonna. “That Darth Vader is suddenly kind hearted and just, and that we can trust him implicitly, that the galaxy is safe in his hands?”

“No one is saying that,” sputtered Ackbar.

“It certainly sounds like it to me,” countered Mon Mothma hotly. “You all seem to forget that the benevolent Lord Vader recently killed two of our pilots, men with wives and children. Not only that, he killed one of his own administrators because he dared to voice an opinion Vader did not approve of. Are you all so blind to what this man is capable of? Have you forgotten the past 22 years of torment he has put us through?”

The three others looked at one another, deeply disturbed by Mon Mothma’s narrow, unyielding viewpoint.

“No one is denying the depth of the damage Darth Vader inflicted upon the galaxy,” Reikan spoke up at last. “What we are saying is that there is a possibility that he has changed, that he has reverted back to the good man we all remember him being before the rise of the Empire. You cannot deny that some of his actions lately have been uncharacteristic of Vader; and why else would Princess Leia and Luke want anything to do with him if he was still the monster we know?”

“Not to mention Padmé Amidala,” Ackbar put in. “The fact of the matter is, he has changed. We cannot discount this, Mothma, nor can we make any foolish, rash moves that would only end up making us look like the very thing we’ve been fighting 22 years to defeat.”

Mothma frowned. “Well, I’m afraid it’s too late for that, gentlemen,” she said simply.

“What are you saying?” Dodonna demanded.

“I’m saying that I have already sent an envoy to Coruscant,” Mon Mothma replied. “I need answers, and it has been more than a week since we first discussed this matter. If the Emperor Vader is truly the benevolent ruler you seem to think he is, then he will not object to us asking some questions.”

“But he is not there, and you bloody well know it, Mothma,” Reikan shot angrily. “What are you up to?”

Mothma made no reply.

“It’s of no consequence,” Ackbar spoke up. “The security around the Imperial palace is so heavy those...envoys won’t get within 100 meters of the place.”

“Oh, I think they will,” Mothma spoke up. “When they tell the empress that we have something that belongs to her, something that holds sentimental, personal value to her.”

The three looked at one another. “What are you talking about?” Dodonna asked.

Mothma simply smiled at them. “All in good time, my good general,” she replied. “All in good time.”

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Chapter 66

CHAPTER 66

"My lord, Jabba the Hutt expresses his sincere regrets that he will not be able to attend the meeting this afternoon."

Anakin and his son exchanged a look. *He's kidding, right?* Luke thought.

Apparently not, his father replied. Then he turned to the messenger.

"You tell your master that if he doesn't get his bloated, maggot infested body down here within 30 minutes I will raze his palace and all the monstrosities inside of it to dust," he said in flawless Huttese. "Is that clear?"

The being, a twilek named Bib Fortuna, blanched visibly. "Yes, your highness," he stammered as he backed away from the ominous pair.

Luke waited until the creature was out of earshot and then turned to his father. "Was that a bluff, Father? Or do you mean to destroy Jabba?"

Anakin sighed. "The hutts are a vile, devious lot, Luke," he replied. "If he refuses to speak to us, then yes, I will."

"And if he does come? What then? What will you say to him?" Luke probed. He was afraid that the Darkness that still lurked deep within his father would rise to the surface if the Hutt proved to be too uncooperative. *But perhaps that is what it will take to make Jabba see that we mean business.*

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Anakin added, sensing his son's unease. "But make no mistake Luke; Jabba is a gangster. In the days of the Republic beings like him were dealt with harshly. He has been allowed too much freedom, too many liberties, and now he sees himself as the self made ruler of this planet. Well his reign is about to end. If it means imprisoning him, then so be it."

"And if it means killing him?"

"Then I won't hesitate to do so," Anakin replied.

Luke nodded in understanding, conflicted and yet trusting that his father knew what he was doing.

"Mother, you've barely touched your breakfast," Leia observed, a frown creasing her brow. "Is there something wrong?"

Padmé looked up at her daughter, unsure how to answer her question. "I'm not feeling the greatest, Leia," she replied. "I think it's all the stress, all the worrying. I haven't heard from your father in a few days, and you know me; I worry about him so."

Leia nodded, not thoroughly convinced that her mother was being completely forthright. "Is that all? Maybe we ought to get you to a doctor."

Padmé frowned. *I hate doctors*, she thought to herself. “I don’t think that’s necessary,” she replied.

“Well I do,” Leia countered. ‘Humor me, Mother,’ she added. “Let me take you into the city. I know how you hate the medical droid; we’ll find a human doctor. I’m just worried that you’re letting yourself get run down. Please? For me?”

Padmé smiled. “You remind me of your father, you know that?” she said.

Leia laughed. “Does that mean yes?”

“Do I have a choice?” Padmé replied.

Leia shook her head. “Nope you don’t” she said, standing up from the table. “Let’s go.”

“So kind of you to grace us with your presence,” Anakin said as a cowed Jabba the Hutt slinked into the make shift audience chamber aboard the Imperial vessel.

Jabba glared at Anakin and Luke, not even trying to hide his anger.

“What is the meaning of all this?” demanded the corpulent creature. “Since when does the Empire interfere in my business?”

“Since *I* became emperor,” Anakin replied, staring unflinchingly at Jabba. “Your days of running this system are over. I have ordered an investigation into your *business* ventures, which I know are merely a front for more nefarious operations.”

“You have no proof of that, Vader,” Jabba growled.

Anakin lifted an eyebrow, surprised by the Hutt’s bravado. It was rumored that Jabba was impervious to the Jedi mind control, and probably felt that he was immune to the powers that Anakin and his son possessed. *The fool*, Anakin reflected.

“I will have all the proof I need,” Anakin replied calmly. “Enough proof to convict you of racketeering, smuggling, drug trafficking, and running a number of prostitution ring, to name only a few of your more lucrative trades.”

Jabba’s only response was a string of Huttese curses, directed at both Anakin and his family. Barely had the words left his enormous maw then Jabba felt himself hurled through the air and against the bulkhead of the ship. Luke was astonished that his father was able to Force push the enormous bulk of the creature, and watched as Jabba struggled to regain his equilibrium, not to mention his pride.

“We are not here to negotiate terms with you,” Anakin continued as Jabba wormed his way across the room once again, somewhat slower than previously. “We are here to destroy the criminal element in this system, starting with you. You may either cooperate willingly, or you may spend what is left of your pathetic existence in the spice mines of Kessel. You have one minute to decide what your fate will be.”

Jabba did not reply, but merely stared at Anakin, the loathing he felt for him evident in his huge, glassy eyes. Then he opened his mouth, but rather than a response, as Anakin and Luke expected, he let out an enormous belch, one that sent a wave of foul smelling air wafting across the room to assault Luke and Anakin’s olfactory senses. Jabba then smiled, but it was the last thing he would ever do, for he was sent across the room once again, this time with

such force that he became embedded in the wall, his bloated body impaled by the broken steel braces that held up the wall, the sinister smile still plastered to his gruesome visage.

Anakin took a moment to calm down. He had come dangerously close to using the Dark Side, so greatly had the Hutt angered him. *I will not give in to it, not again*, he vowed to himself. *I will not let my family down, not this time.*

“So much for negotiation,” Anakin said at last, regarding the disgusting mess. “Let’s go.” He and Luke walked to the door.

“Send someone in there to clean up that mess,” Luke told one of the clones who stood guard inside the door. “And repair that bulkhead.”

The clone looked at the remains of Jabba as they hung against the shattered bulkhead. He shook his head, amazed that anyone would be foolish enough to challenge the emperor Vader.

“Well, what seems to be the trouble?” the physician asked as Padmé sat down on the chair he offered her. Leia stood beside her.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Padmé repaid. “I’m just tired, that’s all.”

The physician nodded. “Anything else? Appetite okay?”

Padmé nodded. “No, not really.”

“She barely eats anything at all,” Leia put in, folding her arms and looking at her mother.

Padmé looked up at her daughter, annoyed. “That’s not true,” she protested.

Leia only lifted her eyebrows in response.

The physician looked from one to the other, sensing that there was some disagreement between the two. “Okay, why don’t we run some tests just to discount anything physical? Is that satisfactory to both of you?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” Leia said. “What do you say, Mother?”

Padmé sighed. “I suppose I really don’t have a choice in the matter do i?” she remarked.

Leia only smiled in response.

Chapter 67

CHAPTER 67

“What did you say?? Are you sure?”

“Yes, quite certain,” the physician replied. “You are pregnant, Mrs. Naberie.”

Leia turned to her mother, a huge smile on her face. “I can’t believe it!” she exclaimed, hugging Padmé. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I... I didn’t know,” Padmé stammered. “Truly, I didn’t....I didn’t think that at my age...”

“Nonsense,” the physician spoke up. “It is not uncommon at all for a woman in her 40’s to have a child.”

“No, I don’t suppose it is,” Padmé replied. Part of her was thrilled; this was an opportunity for her and Anakin to raise their child, to experience all the precious moments of childhood that they had been robbed of with Luke and Leia. Yet, she was uncertain how Anakin would feel about this unexpected turn of events. She remembered back to the day she had told him that she was pregnant with Luke and Leia, so long ago. He had been so happy, so very excited.....

This is a happy day... the happiest day of my life...

Suddenly Padmé remembered the way Anakin had looked at her when they had said goodbye to one another nearly one month ago. He looked as though he had been told a secret, a marvelous secret; and now she realized what it was. *He knew...*

“Shall I set up a prenatal visit for you then? Say in a months’ time?”

Padmé looked up at the physician, tearing herself away from her musings. She nodded. “Yes, please do.”

“The emperor and I wish to visit the city while the repairs are being made,” Luke told one of the clones. “Arrange for us to have some local attire so that we may move about the populace unnoticed.”

“At once, my lord,” the clone replied, bowing and then leaving the room.

Luke walked back to his father and sat down with him to finish his meal. “I haven’t been to Mos Espa in years,” he said as he picked up his fork. “Though I’m sure it hasn’t changed much.”

Anakin shook his head. “Probably not since I was a child here,” he agreed. “There will be a lot of changes around here, however, now that the hutt influence has been removed.”

Luke nodded. “About time too,” he put in. “What do you plan to have done with Jabba’s money?”

“Divide among the slaves in his possession,” Anakin replied. “The palace is going to be destroyed just as soon as they round up all the denizens within. Quite a den of inequity I’m sure.”

“No doubt of that,” Luke replied. “His name was synonymous with debauchery and crime for as long as I can remember.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Anakin replied, pushing his plate away. “I remember his wife, my mother and I were owned by her. She was incredibly cruel; a truly loathsome creature.”

“I can see why the two of them ended up together then,” Luke quipped with a smile.

“My lord, excuse the interruption...”

Both Anakin and Luke turned to see a clone standing in the doorway.

“What is it?” Anakin asked.

“I have procured some native garb for you,” the clone replied, holding out a bundle of clothing. “Lord Vengeance requested it.”

Anakin nodded. “Very good,” he replied. “Set it down and leave us.”

The clone complied immediately.

“Well son, ready to pay a visit to the locals?” Anakin said, standing up and walking over to the pile of clothes.

Luke smiled, standing up too. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Anakin held up a beige tunic made of lightweight fabric. “I remember seeing you in something like this on board the Death Star,” he told his son. “I caught only a glimpse of you, but I noticed it at once, realizing that you must have been from Tatooine. Where else would sackcloth be fashionable?”

Luke laughed. “Very true. Come on, I’m looking forward to checking out the place.”

Anakin nodded as he started to disrobe. “Yes, so am I.”

Padmé and Leia arrived back at the Imperial palace in time to sit down to dinner.

“Well?” Han asked as they sat down to join him. “Everything okay?”

Padmé and Leia looked at one another. Padmé had asked Leia not to tell Han, not just yet; and Leia had agreed to honor her wishes.

“Just run down,” Padmé replied, picking up her fork and trying to summon up her appetite. “They gave me some vitamins.”

Han, being male, did not suspect for an instant that there was anything more to it, and simply continued with his meal. “We still on for tonight then?” he asked Leia.

Leia looked at her mother, completely forgetting about the plans that she and Han had made to go into the city that evening.

"Oh, I forgot," she said. "I'm not sure if we should... Mother shouldn't really be left alone just now. I mean..."

"Nonsense," Padmé put in. "I'm fine. You two go on and have a fun time. I'll probably just turn in early anyway."

"Are you sure?" Leia asked her concern evident on her face.

Padmé reached over and put her hand on Leia's. "Yes, completely sure. But thank you for worrying, love."

Leia smiled. "Okay, if you're sure."

"I am. Now let's eat before this gets cold."

As Anakin made his way through the crowded dusty streets of Mos Espa with his son, a thousand memories assaulted his mind. *Watto's junk shop, where he met his angel... Jira and her pallie stand... Sebulba and his swaggering... and home... Mom...*

"Father?"

Anakin looked at his son, not realizing that Luke had already called him more than once.

"Sorry Luke," he apologized. "Just lost in a sea of memories."

Luke nodded. "I'm sure," he said. "You grew up here, didn't you?"

"Yes," Anakin said, stopping as they reached the shop where he had worked for Watto. *Was he still alive?* Anakin wondered. Toydarians could live to be 70 years of age, he reflected; but Watto didn't exactly live a clean life.

"That is the place where I met your mother for the first time," Anakin said at last, nodding in the direction of the shop. "I was 9, and she was 14. I knew the minute I set eyes on her that she would be the love of my life."

Luke smiled. "That's an amazing story," he said. "Mother told us about that day. Where did you live with grandma? Is it around here?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, not far. Down this way," he said, walking along the street, passing the same buildings he had passed hundreds of times growing up. When he reached the doorway of the home he had shared with his beloved mother, he stopped, unprepared for the emotional onslaught seeing it again would herald.

"There," he said softly. "That was where I lived with your grandmother," he told his son. "I can still see her standing there when I left with Qui-Gon to become a Jedi."

Will I ever see you again?

What does your heart tell you?

"I wish I'd known her," Luke said at last, sensing his father's immense sadness.

Anakin turned and looked at him, a sad smile upon his face. "She was a wonderful, gentle, wise woman," he told Luke. "And I know that had she lived to know you and your sister, she would have been immensely proud."

“She would have been proud of you too, Father,” Luke told him.

Anakin frowned. *Would she? Would she have been proud of the monster I became? Of the atrocities I spent a life time committing?*

“Perhaps,” he said simply. “Come on, let’s go.”

As they made their way back to the centre of town, a woman approached them, and Luke found himself being stared at. And then he realized why.

“Camie??” He asked as the woman got closer.

The woman smiled. “I thought that was you, Wormie,” she replied, putting her arms around Luke to give him a hug.

Wormie?? Anakin questioned his son silently, an amused expression on his face.

Don’t ask, Luke replied, causing Anakin to chuckle.

“What are you doing here?” Camie asked. “I thought you left Tatooine years ago.”

“I did,” Luke replied. ‘I’m just back for a visit with my father.’ He turned to Anakin. “This is my father, Anakin Skywalker. Father, this is an old friend of mine, Camie.”

Anakin nodded his head in her direction. “Nice to meet you, Miss...”

“Lozeozner, and it’s Mrs.,” Camie said, showing Luke her wedding band. “Fixer and I got hitched about a year back.”

“Congratulations,” Luke said with a smile. “Can’t say I’m really surprised.”

Camie shrugged. “You gonna be here for the big race? He’ll be there if you want to say hi.”

“What race?” Anakin asked at once.

Camie looked at him. “Pod race, what else?” she replied. “Big one tonight at Boonta Eve. You interested?”

Anakin smiled and looked at his son. “You could say so.”

Chapter 68

CHAPTER 68

“Are you sure you don’t mind if we go out tonight?”

“Why would I mind?” Padmé replied. “Go! I know what it’s like to be young and in love,” she added with a smile.

Leia smiled back, and then gave her mother a hug. “Okay,” she said. “I love you, Mother,” she added.

“I love you too, Leia,” replied Padmé, feeling emotional at the exchange. “Have a nice time.”

Leia left her mother and headed upstairs to get changed for the evening. Padmé considered going to bed, but reasoned that it was far too early, and she would only end up waking up in the middle of the night and start fretting about Anakin and Luke. Instead she returned to her office and continued to work on the notes that she and Leia had made.

“Can I get you something, my lady?”

Padmé looked up to see her protocol droid standing there. “No, thank you,” she replied. As the droid left her, Padmé was reminded of the golden protocol droid that had been her companion during the long weeks without Anakin during the Clone Wars, C3PO. He had an almost human fussiness about him, and it made Padmé think that he was more human than anyone realized. Leia had mentioned that both 3PO and the little astromech that had been Anakin’s companion during many a battle, R2 D2. They had been her and Anakin’s only witnesses at their wedding, 3PO had been the first one who had learned of her pregnancy with Luke and Leia, and had been with her during many other pivotal moments in her life *I wonder if they’d know me now*, she mused. *Not likely...* no doubt the memories of both droids had been erased more than once in the ensuing years since Padmé had seen them last so many years ago. Captain Antilles had taken ownership of the two droids; it was Obi-Wan’s belief that a connection would be made between them and Padmé, and so they too were removed from her life for her own protection. Still, part of her missed the quirky protocol droid.

Shaking the painful memories from her mind, Padmé picked up her datapad and set to work.

Waves of memories, good memories, struck Anakin as he, Luke and Camie walked through the large entrance of the arena. The seats were already packed with loud, boisterous spectators, anxiously awaiting the last of the contestants to take their place at the starting line. There seemed to be some delay, as some of the spectators were starting to get unruly.

“Wonder what the delay is,” Luke commented.

Anakin shook his head. “One of the lanes is vacant,” he noticed. “Must be mechanical problems.”

“There’s Fixer,” Luke said, pointing at a young dark haired man who was approaching them. “Maybe he knows what’s going on.”

“Is that Luke Skywalker?” Fixer said with a grin as he reached the trio. He held out his hand to Luke and the two shook hands. “Long time no see, kid. What brings you to these parts? I heard you took off two years ago.”

“I did,” Luke replied. “I’m just here for a short time. My father and I will be leaving by nightfall.”

Fixer turned to the man at Luke’s side, surprised to see the resemblance between them.

“I thought your father was dead,” Fixer commented.

“It’s a long story,” Luke replied, smiling in Anakin’s direction. “Fixer, meet Anakin Skywalker, my dad.”

Fixer shook Anakin’s hand. “Did you say *Anakin* Skywalker??” he asked.

Anakin nodded his head. “That’s correct,” he replied.

“The same Anakin Skywalker who fought in the Clone Wars?”

Anakin nodded again. “You’re too young to remember that time,” he commented.

“My pop told me stories about the wars,” Fixer replied. “Your name came up more than once. I had no idea Wormie here had such a famous dad.”

Anakin smiled at the name again, and looked at his son, whose face bore a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

“So what’s the hold up?” Camie asked, interrupted the conversation.

“Ah, the pilot who was supposed to be in that lane broke a tentacle earlier today,” Fixer replied. “He’s the best one around, too. Guess they’ll have to run the race with one empty lane.”

Luke looked at his father. “Too bad, isn’t it Dad?”

Anakin lifted an eyebrow. “Yes, it is,” he replied. He narrowed his eyes as he realized what his son was suggesting. “Now wait a minute, Luke,” he said, almost as though Luke had made the suggestion audibly.

“Come on!” Luke urged. “You are the only human to ever pod race! Aren’t you just itching to have another shot at it?”

Fixer turned his attention once again to the elder Skywalker. “*You* pod raced??” he said incredulously. “Are you that kid that I’ve heard stories about??”

Anakin smiled. “I was,” he replied. “A long time ago.”

“But you’re still the greatest pilot around,” Luke countered. “Bar none.”

“You’re very kind to say so Luke,” Anakin replied. “But...”

“The prize money is huge,” Camie put in for good measure. “5000 at least.”

"It's not the money," Luke put in, but Anakin interrupted him.

"5000?" he asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Okay, I'll do it."

Luke was puzzled by his father's sudden interest, and even more so that he would care about money. As emperor he had more wealth than anyone in the galaxy; why would the thought of a measly 5000 credits mean anything to him?

"Come on this way," Fixer said, taking Anakin by the arm. "I'll introduce you to the owner of the pod racer. I'm sure when he learns who you are, he'll be more than willing to let you race."

Padmé was just about to turn in for the night when she heard someone out in the hall. Reasoning that it was Han and Leia home from their evening out, she called out to them.

"Leia? You're home early," she called, but there was no response. She frowned, figuring that her daughter hadn't heard her. *I hope they haven't been fighting again*, she thought, reflecting on the stormy relationship her daughter had with Han Solo. She had been witness to more than one scrap between the two of them, feeling terribly uncomfortable to do so. *That's probably what happened*, she reasoned. *They had a row and have come home early.*

Padmé put her datapad away and stood up to leave the room, when she heard someone approaching the office. A female, uniformed imperial officer appeared in the doorway, one whom Padmé did not recognize.

"Padmé Amidala?" the officer asked.

Padmé frowned at the woman's familiarity but did not comment. "Who are you and what are you doing here in my home at such a late hour?"

"I've come to return something to you," the woman answered, gesturing outside the door for someone to come forward. Padmé watched in astonishment as the very droids she had been thinking of earlier that evening appeared.

"Threepio??" she asked. "R2?? What... I don't understand..." she began, and then a feeling of unease started to blossom within her. *Those droids were last in the possession of the Rebel Alliance...*

"What do you want?" Padmé asked, taking a step back from the woman, moving towards the security alarm located on the underside of her desk. "And don't try to tell me that you're an imperial officer either, for I don't believe it."

"Don't take another step," the woman said quietly, drawing her weapon. "If you summon security, your daughter and her companion are as good as dead."

Padmé's eyes grew wide. "What??!" she exclaimed.

The woman nodded. "I have three associates who have been following them since they left here earlier tonight," she told Padmé. 'And all I need to do is give the word and they will act. So unless you want your precious princess harmed, you'll do exactly as I say.' She turned to the droids. "Beat it." She said curtly.

"How rude!" Threepio declared as he and R2 left the room.

“What do you want from me?” Padmé asked, fighting to remain calm, even though she realized the gravity of her situation. “Who are you?”

“You want to know who I am?” the woman asked, her eyes reflecting her anger suddenly. “I’m the widow of one of the pilots you and your family blasted into oblivion a few weeks ago. You remember that, your majesty??”

No, I don’t... I slept through the whole thing... Padmé wanted to tell her, but realized that would not be wise. “I’m sorry,” she said instead.

“Spare me,” the woman retorted. ‘Now let’s go. Your presence is kindly requested on the command ship, my lady,’ she said with a sarcastic tone. “And if you don’t come along quietly, you know what will happen.”

Padmé nodded. *Yes, I know...* she reflected grimly, knowing that this woman would gladly kill Leia and Han in revenge for the loss of her husband.

“I won’t give you any trouble,” she said as she approached the woman.

“Smart lady. Let’s go.”

Chapter 69

CHAPTER 69

"You're the Anakin Skywalker who won the Boonta Eve Classic? The only human to ever do it?"

Anakin nodded. "That's me," he replied.

"You think you remember how to operate one of these babies?" the owner of the pod racer asked.

Anakin looked at the racer. It was configured differently than the racers he'd raced, but that didn't concern him. "Yes," he replied simply. *It's not a matter of remembering*, he thought to himself. *It's second nature*.

"Well, what have I got to lose?" the man remarked. "I'm already out the enrollment fee if I forfeit the race. So go ahead. If you win, I'll give you 20 of the prize money."

Anakin frowned. "No, you'll give me 80," he said, using the Force to manipulate the man's mind.

"Make that 80," the man corrected himself.

Anakin smiled and looked at his son. "In that case, you have a deal."

Han and Leia arrived back at the palace shortly after midnight. They were not expecting to see Padmé up, due to the lateness of the hour. What they did not expect was to see two familiar droids in the great hall.

"Mistress Leia, Captain Solo!" Threepio exclaimed upon seeing them. "I'm so happy to see you!"

Leia became alarmed immediately, sensing that something was wrong, very wrong. "Threepio, how did you get here??"

"We were delivered brought here by a rather rude young woman," the droid replied. "She had the most atrocious manners, and..."

"Who was she?" Han asked, cutting off the droid's commentary.

"A member of the Alliance, I presume," Threepio replied. 'Although she wore an Imperial uniform, and we arrived here in an Imperial shuttle,' he added. "So I'm not entirely certain..."

"Where is my mother?" Leia asked, realizing all of a sudden what was going on.

"Your mother, princess??" Threepio asked.

"Yes, my mother!!" Leia cried, becoming frantic. "Where is she??"

She ran into the office, looked around briefly and saw that her mother's work had not been filed away. *That is not like her.* Leia thought anxiously. *She's meticulous about such things.* Leia left the office and rejoined Han and the droids.

"She's not there," she replied. "I'm going to look upstairs"

"Wait, sweetheart," Han said, taking her arm. 'R2 can do a scan to locate her faster than you can look in every room.' He turned to the little droid. "Scan for... no, wait, he can't," he realized in frustration. "He would have no idea what to look for."

R2 beeped in response.

"What did he say?" Leia asked.

"I don't know where he gets his delusions," Threepio commented petulantly. 'He *claims* to know your mother, Princess Leia,' he continued, shaking his head. "Honestly R2D2, where *do* you get your..."

"You know my mother?" Leia asked R2, completely ignoring the protocol droid. "How??"

R2 replied in a string of beeps and whistles. Leia looked to Threepio for the translation.

"He says that he has known her since she was a child and that he..."

"Never mind the details right now," Han interjected impatiently. "Just scan for her!"

R2 complied at once, and then replied in a short burst of beeps that required no translation. *She wasn't to be found.*

"I'm afraid R2's sensors can find no trace of Padmé," Threepio translated.

Leia turned to Han. "They took her," she said, anger filling her. "Mon Mothma is behind this, I'm sure of it!! If any harm comes to my mother, Mothma will pay for it, I swear to you."

Han was unnerved by Leia's declaration. He knew she had a temper, but this was different. This was... *dark.*

"Now don't jump to any conclusions, sweetheart," Han said, taking her by the shoulders. "Mon Mothma may be a lot of things, but she's not violent. She wouldn't do anything to harm your mother, it's not her way."

"Han, there's something you don't know," Leia replied. "Mother is pregnant. She only found out a few days ago."

Han's eyes widened at this disclosure. *This changes everything,* he reflected. "We'd better let your father know," he said.

Leia nodded. "Yes, I can only imagine how angry he will be," she replied, frowning at the thought of her father's reaction.

"You do that, and I'll find out what I can from golden rod here about the location of the rebel fleet," Han responded. 'Don't worry, Leia,' he added. "We'll find her."

Leia made no reply, but left the room to contact her father. *You'll rue the day you messed with this family, Mothma,* she thought to herself. *You have no idea who you are dealing with.*

Anakin had almost forgotten the thrill of being at the controls of a pod racer. It had been many years since he had last raced, but it took him no time to familiarize himself with the configuration of the new machine at his control. He adjusted the helmet, readying himself as the start of the race approached. As he focused on the Force, he felt a tremor, a surge of negative emotions; but before he had a chance to determine where it was coming from, the starting signal was heard. He hit the accelerator and jumped out to an early lead, handling the pod as though it was an extension of him.

Luke sat with Camie and Fixer in the stands, watching as his father burst out of the starting line. He too had sensed a negative surge of energy in the Force, but unlike Anakin, he could focus on its origin. *Leia...* Luke was troubled to discover this, and wondered what was happening. *What is wrong Leia?? What is going on??* He asked her, hoping that even at this distance she would hear him in her mind. But the only response he got was a surge of anger, a surge of darkness that frightened him. *What has happened that is causing her to feel this way?* Luke wondered.

"Your dad is incredible," Fixer commented as Anakin's podracer sped past, lapping the other racers easily. "Now I know where you get it from, Luke."

Luke wasn't really listening, his mind preoccupied with the negative feeling he sensed in his sister, worrying about what had her so upset.

"Luke? You okay, kid?"

Luke looked at Fixer. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine," he said, returning his attention to the race. "He's quite the pilot, isn't he?" he remarked with a smile, the pride evident in his face.

Fixer nodded. "Yeah, sure is. I guess he was a real hero in the wars too; you must be proud to be his kid."

"I am," Luke replied at once. "Very proud."

Anakin could sense the racer in the next lane getting closer, and hit the accelerator harder, draining for all it could give. He knew the route like the back of his hand, every turn, every dip and dive. Now that he was a parent himself, however, he realized why his mother was so worried every time he raced; he would feel the same way if one of his children were to get it into their mind that they waited to race. He smiled as he thought of Padmé, wondering if she had found out yet what he had suspected before he left. *Another child... this time we will raise him, or her; this time I'll get it right.*

"I heard a rumor that they were going to outlaw these races," Camie commented as Anakin's racer sped past in a blur for the penultimate lap. "Too many accidents or something like that."

"Well they are pretty dangerous," Fixer replied. 'I've seen a few bastards get fried out there. Oops, sorry kid,' he added, turning to Luke. "I don't think you need to worry about your dad."

Luke smiled. "No, I don't think so either." *At least not when it comes to racing anyway.*

"That was one hell of a race," Fixer said, shaking Anakin's hand. "Not even close!"

Anakin smiled, wiping the sweat and dirt from his face. "Thanks," he replied. "It was fun."

“Anakin Skywalker? Is that really you??”

Anakin turned to see a tall, dark haired man approaching him. There was something about the eyes that looked familiar. *No, it can't be...*

“Kitster??” Anakin asked in surprise.

Kitster broke into a huge grin when he saw that it was indeed Anakin. “Wow, I never expected to see you on this dust heap again!”

Anakin laughed. “Well, it has been while since I’ve been here,” he replied. ‘I’m here with my son,’ he added, turning to Luke. “This is my son, Luke,” he told Kitster. “Luke, meet Kitster, one of my childhood friends.”

Luke extended a hand to the man. “Nice to meet you,” he said.

Kitster nodded. “Wow, you sure look like you’re father,” he commented. “I had no idea you had a son, Ani. When did all that happen?”

“Well, Luke is 21,” Anakin replied. “So you do the math.”

Kitster grinned. “I guess you were keeping busy all these years then, weren’t you?”

Yes, far too busy... Anakin reflected.

“What about you?” Anakin asked. “Married? Kids?”

Kitster nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got 4 daughters,” he replied with a smile. “My wife and I run a shelter for orphans. It’s pretty hard work, there never seems to be enough to go around.”

“I’m sure,” Anakin replied. “There have always been a lot of needy people here.”

“You on Tatooine for long?” Kitster asked.

Anakin shook his head. “No, we’re leaving within the next hour,” he replied. “I wasn’t exactly planning on racing this afternoon,” he added with a smile.

“Well you’re still a hell of a pod racer,” Kitster replied. “Even without me in the pit.”

Anakin grinned.

“Well, here’s your winnings,” the owner of the pod racer as he approached the small group. He handed Anakin an envelope full of money. “Sure I can’t talk you into sticking around for next week’s race? You’re a sure thing.”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Anakin replied, taking the envelope. ‘But thanks for the offer. My son and I need to get going now.’ He turned to Kitster. “Here, take this money,” he said. “I want you to use this to help out those orphans.”

Kitster’s eyes grew wide as he accepted the money. “That is really generous of you, Ani,” he said. “This will go a long way, thanks. Thanks a lot.”

Anakin smiled. “It’s been good to see you again,” he said, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I wish I could stay longer to meet your family, but we need to go.”

“I wish you could too,” Kitster replied. “But it was great seeing you. Try to get back this way once in a while, will you? Next time bring the wife.”

Anakin grinned. "Deal." He turned to Luke and his friends. "Time to go, son. It was good to meet you both."

"Same here," Fixer replied, shaking Anakin's hand.

Luke bade goodbye to his friends as well, inwardly feeling anxious to be alone with his father so he could tell him of the disturbance he had felt in the Force. No doubt Anakin had felt it as well. Luke only hoped that whatever it was, it had nothing to do with his mother; she had been central to Anakin's fall to the Dark Side all those years ago, and Luke knew that his father was extremely protective of her. *No, it's probably just another fight with Han*, Luke reasoned, trying not to think the worst. *Leia's temper is incredibly volatile.*

"The repairs are all finished, my lords," a clone told them as Anakin and Luke entered the ship.

"Good," Anakin replied. "Prepare to take off right away."

"There is a message waiting for you, Lord Vader," the clone added. "Priority from Coruscant."

Anakin turned to Luke. "You know I felt something earlier, Luke," he said with a frown as they made their way inside. "A disturbance in the force... I couldn't focus on it because the race began."

"I felt it too," Luke told his father. "It's Leia. She's angry, Father, very angry."

"What is she angry about?" Anakin wondered aloud as he sat down at the comm. screen. He activated the screen and called up the message. A holographic image flickered into view. Anakin and Luke's sense of alarm increased when they saw the image of Leia before them.

Father, Luke, there's no easy way to tell you this. Mother had been abducted by the Rebel Alliance. They used Threepio and R2 D2 to get past the security, claiming that they were returning them to Mother. Han and I have located the fleet, but we will wait until we hear from you before we take any action. Leia paused for a moment before continuing. There's more; Mother is pregnant. She found out a few days ago. Please contact me as soon as you get this message, Father.

Luke and Anakin sat in silence as they digested the sobering message. Luke could feel the anger in his father, boiling up inside of him.

"I'll try to reach Leia now," Luke said at last.

Anakin made no reply, and his silence was alarming to Luke.

They have Padmé...they have my pregnant wife... if any harm comes to either of them, may the Force protect them from my vengeance...

"Luke? Luke is that you?"

"Hi Leia," Luke replied when he saw his sister's image appear. "We just got your message. What else can you tell us?"

Leia shook her head. "Nothing," she replied. "No message was left, nor have we received any since."

“We’re coming home, Leia,” Anakin spoke up at last, his voice eerily calm. “I will not allow this heinous act to go unpunished.”

Leia nodded. “Nor will I,” she concurred. “How soon will you be here?”

“As soon as possible, even if we have to blow the ship apart to get it there,” Anakin replied.

“We’ll see you soon then,” Leia replied, replied that her father was coming to deal with this. *They’ll soon regret their actions when they have to face his wrath...* she reflected with grim satisfaction. *You’ll be sorry you messed with my family, Mon Mothma; I’ll make sure of that.*

Anakin stood up as Leia’s image faded from sight. He picked up his cloak and threw it on to hide his face.

“Father, I know you’re angry,” Luke began tentatively, sensing the Darkness swirling around his father’s aura. “But please don’t give into hate...”

Anakin turned sharply to look at his son. “Don’t tell me what to do, Luke,” he snapped. “You’ve never loved a woman; you don’t know what it’s like to feel the way I do right now. You’re mother is a part of me; she is in my very soul, Luke. I swear to you, if they harm her, or the child she carries, I won’t rest until every last one of them pays for it.” He swept out of the room to head for the cockpit, leaving his son feeling terrified and anxious. *Please don’t leave us again, Father*, Luke thought desperately. *Please don’t let the Darkness win again.*

Chapter 70

CHAPTER 70

Padmé fought against the nausea that she had woken up with every morning for the past few weeks. The last thing she needed was to give her captor another weapon to use against her. *No, I must be strong... I mustn't show them how frightened I am...* She thought about Anakin, and wondered if he knew yet, wondered if Leia had put it together what had happened. *Of course she will, she's a brilliant young woman...* Padmé thought, her throat tightening at the thought of the conversation she'd had with Leia the previous day. Despite the fact that they had spent a lifetime apart, Padmé felt as close to her grown children now as though they had been with her since their birth. *And now there is another one*, she thought, putting her hand on her abdomen.

"We've dropped out of light speed."

Padmé looked up to see the woman who had abducted her enter the small hold. She merely nodded in response.

"What does the Alliance want with me?" she asked.

"I guess you'll find out soon enough, won't you?" the woman asked.

"If your leaders don't realize the ramifications of this abduction, then they must truly be fools," she said.

The woman smirked. "And if you and your husband think they are going to dupe the galaxy with this pretense of good will, then it is *you* who are the fools."

Padmé shook her head. "You know nothing about me or my husband," she replied angrily. "None of you do."

"I think we do," the woman replied. "We're almost there, prepare yourself."

Padmé watched her leave, her sense of unease growing the closer they came to the Rebel fleet. *Ani, help me!*

"ETA to Coruscant?" Anakin demanded.

The pilot jumped in his seat at the sound of the emperor's voice. "Uh, less than 3 hours, sir," he replied.

"Not good enough," Anakin barked. "Push that hyperdrive until it bleeds, do you hear me? I want to be there in one hour. Understood?"

"But sir, the engines won't take that..."

"Don't tell me what the engines will or will not do," Anakin retorted angrily. "I designed this model; I know what the engines can bloody well do!!"

"Yes, sir, of course, sir," the pilot replied. "I'll push it for all she's got."

“One hour. No less.”

Leia paced up and down in the great hall of the palace, unable to do anything but worry as they waited for Anakin and Luke to arrive. Han had tried to get her to get some sleep, to have something to eat; but Leia flatly refused. Han knew better than to argue with her; besides, he was as concerned as Leia as he was about Padmé. He had never seen her like this. Usually when Leia was angry she shouted, she fumed, she stormed; but there was an eerie calm to her demeanor that alarmed Han. He didn't know what would happen should something befall Padmé; he didn't want to think about it.

“Mistress Leia, they've arrived,” Threepio announced as he and R2D2 entered the hall.

Leia looked over at Han briefly and then ran to the entranceway of the private tunnel that leads to the landing platform. It wasn't long before Anakin, Luke and Chewbacca emerged.

“I'm so glad you're here,” Leia said as she embraced Anakin tightly. Just being in his embrace made her feel better; but she sensed a change in him since the last time she'd seen him. She pulled back and looked at him. “Father?”

“Where is she, Leia?” Anakin asked his voice full of barely restrained anger. “Where are those bastards who took her?”

“Sullust,” Han spoke up. “They're in the Sullust System”

Anakin looked up at Han and nodded. “Then we shall make for the Sullust System. We will leave in 30 minutes.” He left the room and headed upstairs, leaving Han, Luke and Leia to watch him.

“I'm worried about him, Leia,” Luke told his twin.

Leia turned and looked at him. “He's very angry, Luke,” she replied. “It's to be expected. We're all angry.”

Luke shook his head. “You don't understand,” he replied. “Anger in him can be dangerous.”

Han frowned. “What do you mean, kid? Dangerous for the idiots who took his wife? Damn right it is.”

“No, I mean the Dark Side, Han,” Luke replied. “He has never completely let go of the darkness, not entirely. This could push him back into the darkness; undo all that he has accomplished in the past 3 months.”

“Don't say that, Luke,” Leia said, his words unnerving her. “Don't even suggest that we could lose him again!”

“We have to make sure we don't, Leia,” Luke replied. “We have to make sure this doesn't destroy him all over again.”

Leia only nodded, knowing that her brother was right. She only hoped that the Rebel Alliance wasn't foolish enough to harm Padmé, for if they did, they would know incur wrath unlike anything they had ever known. *The wrath of the Sith.*

Flanked by two guards, Padmé walked through the same corridors that she had walked through seemingly such a short time ago with Anakin and Han. But both Anakin and Han were light years away, and unable to help her.

“Right this way, your majesty,” one of the guards said as they stopped at a door. Padmé waited for the door to open, and then proceeded inside, prodded by her armed escort. Once inside she saw her one time friend, Mon Mothma, sitting alone at a long table. She was surprised that she was alone, and wondered where the other leaders she had seen the last time she had been here were. *Were they unaware that she was here? Had Mon Mothma acted alone in this?* It didn’t seem likely, but the absence of any of the other leaders was highly irregular, and it made Padmé wonder if there was some dissention among the leaders of the Rebel Alliance.

“So nice of you to come,” Mon Mothma said, not trying to hide her acrimony. “Please, sit.”

Padmé took the seat that the guard pulled out for her, facing Mothma unflinchingly. “You have a lot of nerve,” she said without preamble. “If you think you’re going to get away with this...”

“Spare me your noble protestations, my lady,” Mon Mothma interjected. “You have a great deal of explaining to do, and you know it.”

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. “Do I?” she asked. “I think you are the one who need to do some explaining. You can begin by telling me where your comrades are.”

Mon Mothma was surprised by the question, and did not respond right away.

“They know nothing about this, do they?” Padmé asked.

“Of course they do,” Mon Mothma replied at once. “You think rather highly of yourself to think that *all* the leaders of the Rebel Alliance will all be here to welcome you...,” she added rather sarcastically.

Padmé knew Mon Mothma well enough to know that she was bluffing, and smiled. “I have no such arrogance,” she replied mildly. “I just assumed that since I am such a dangerous enemy that your entire staff would be here to interrogate me,” she countered, a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

Mon Mothma became angry with Padmé’s calm demeanor, for she had hoped that Padmé’s fear alone would be enough to coax the information from her. Obviously it would not.

“So tell me, Padmé,” Mothma continued, doing her utmost to match Padmé’s coolness. “Why is it a former senator of the Republic and a champion of democracy is now the consort of the Galactic Emperor? And don’t try to deny it; obviously we figured out your game.”

“Game? Is that what you think this is?” Padmé retorted, her dark eyes flashing angrily for a moment.

“I have no idea what this is,” Mon Mothma countered. “I was hoping you could enlighten me.”

Padmé was about to speak when the door behind her opened. She turned and saw two men enter, two of the other leaders she had seen the last time she had been here. Judging by the

shocked looks on their faces, they did not know that she was here. Until now.

“Gentlemen, I believe you know our illustrious empress,” Mon Mothma said.

Generals Reikan and Dodonna approached the table, their expressions changing from shock to anger as they realized that Mon Mothma had gone over their heads.

“My lady, are you alright?” Dodonna asked, sitting down beside her.

Padmé frowned. “Why are you asking me that? Surely my well being was the furthest thing from your mind when you sent a hired gun to abduct me from my home.”

“I assure you, my lady, that we were very much against this idea,” Reikan spoke up, glaring at Mon Mothma. “Obviously our misgivings were ignored.”

“Enough,” Mothma snapped. “We have been through all this, and now is not the time to rehash it all.”

“The hell it isn’t,” Dodonna growled. “You’ve abducted the wife of the emperor! You’ve brought down the Empire on our heads! Don’t you realize that??”

Padmé sat back, watching the three of them bickering. *Incredible*, she thought. *No wonder the Alliance has never managed to accomplish anything.*

“We can at least agree on one thing,” Mothma said at last, looking back at Padmé. “That we have a lot of questions, and that you, Padmé, are the best one to give them to us.”

“Why me?” Padmé asked. ‘My husband could tell you what you need to know. Why is it you sent someone to abduct me and not him? Much easier to bully a woman than a Jedi knight, isn’t it? You cowards,’ she spat. “You have no idea what Anakin and I are doing, no faith whatsoever that we are doing what is best for the galaxy. All you can see is black and white, the Empire has always been evil, and so anyone who is a part of it is evil by association. You don’t have the vision or the intellect to see that there is more to things than you know.”

“Perhaps you could explain it to us then,” Reikan suggested gently. “That is all we want, my lady; I assure you. We don’t understand any of this, including your children’s defection.”

Padmé shook her head. “Defection?? Is that what you call wanting to be with their parents? They have done nothing to merit your distrust, and yet you treated them like traitors!! My son destroyed the Empire’s Death Star single handedly, my daughter stole the plans to enable him to do it; and yet you still mistrust them simply because of who their father is. And now you expect me to explain what we are doing, what are plans are. Well I won’t do it,” she said firmly. “I won’t jeopardize what my family is working so hard to achieve by revealing to you, who are so petty and narrow minded that you’d probably ruin everything.”

“You sound just like one of them, you know that?” Mothma retorted. “You truly are an imperial now, Padmé; I can’t believe it. You, of all people! You seem to forget the matter of two Alliance pilots being killed,” she added. “How else can you explain that except that you have embraced the imperial philosophy as your own?”

“Now Mothma, you are being rather harsh,” Dodonna spoke up. “This is not an interrogation! Stop treating her as though she were a prisoner!”

“She is the wife of Darth Vader,” Mon Mothma countered. “How would you like me to treat her?”

“We’ve been through this, Mothma,” Reikan said, getting frustrated with his comrade’s attitude. “You’re only asking for trouble if you carry on this way.”

Padmé had stopped listening to what they were saying, for she had begun to grow alarmed by a nagging dull ache in her pelvic area. *No... don't let anything happen to my baby... please...*

“Padmé are you listening to anything we are saying?” Mon Mothma asked in exasperation.

Padmé looked up at her, the anxiety within her growing. “I... I think I need to see a doctor.”

“Here, I want you to have this,” Anakin said to Leia.

She looked down at his hand to see what she recognized as a lightsaber. “You want me to have *this*?” she asked in amazement as she took the weapon from his hand.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “I made this a few weeks ago, before Luke and I left for the Outer Rim. I was hoping that you would show an interest in learning the Jedi arts, and so I took the liberty of making this for you. Normally a padawan would make her own, but...”

“I can’t believe you did this for me,” Leia said, cutting him off. She examined the weapon reverently, almost afraid to touch it. She knew the power it harnessed, and was more than a little awed by it.

“Here,” Anakin said, standing up and holding his hand out to her. “Let me show you how to use it.”

Leia stood up and assumed the stance as her father instructed. *This feels right*, she thought as she held the saber in the classic Shii-Cho stance.

“Very good,” Anakin said with a smile. “You’re a natural.” He took out his own saber and proceeded to teach her a few rudimentary steps, how to parry, how to lunge, how not to cut off her own head with the blade.

“Pretty good with that thing, Leia,” Luke said as he entered the room.

Leia looked up and smiled at him. “Yeah, well, I have a good teacher,” she said, looking at Anakin.

“You think this is necessary, Father?” Luke asked.

“Of course,” Anakin said, looking back at Leia. “She is a natural, just as you are. It’s about time she had her own lightsaber.”

“No, I don’t mean that,” Luke said. “I mean, right now. Do you think that we will be forced to use our weapons? Do you anticipate things getting violent?”

Anakin frowned. “I don’t want them to be,” he replied honestly. “But let’s be honest, Luke. It’s highly likely that we will have a fight on our hands once we get there.”

"I agree," Leia said, slashing through the air with her new saber. "They're not going to get away with this, Luke."

Luke frowned, concerned not only for his father now, but also his sister. She and Anakin were so alike; their anger equally volatile.

"Of course not," Luke said at last. "But there are solutions that don't require fighting. As Jedi we have to find those solutions."

Anakin nodded, realizing that his son was right. His mind told him so, but his heart told him something else entirely. *Padmé is in danger... Padmé is carrying my child... if they hurt her, if they hurt them; I will not hesitate to exact my revenge...*

"We've reached the Sullust System," Han said as he entered the hold. "Show time."

Anakin looked back at his children. "Yes, so it is." *Hold on Padmé, we're almost there.*

Chapter 71

CHAPTER 71

Chewbacca hated being left behind. He knew that the palace needed protection, and that the Skywalkers were on a personal mission; yet that didn't make him feel any better. He wanted to do something, anything, to help; and sitting here was not helping. What made matters worse was the presence of the irritating protocol droid he had been only too happy to leave behind at the Rebel fleet. *Just great* thought the wookiee when he, Han and the Big Skywalker had first arrived home. The droid, of course, had been overjoyed to see all its friends and had done nothing but prattle on about every single detail of his existence since they had last been all together. The thought of shutting him down completely had crossed Chewbacca's mind more than once; but he didn't have the heart to do it. Besides, as much as he hated to admit it, there was something comforting about having a familiar voice around, no matter how annoying that voice was.

"R2D2, when will you ever stop trying to impress everyone with your exaggerated tales?" Chewbacca heard Threepio telling the astromech droid. "A sea monster? It *ate* you? Indeed!" R2 responded with an interrogative series of beeps and whistles. Chewbacca was certain that he had detected a hint of condescension in the droid's tone.

"No, I have not been to the planet Dagobah," Threepio retorted. "But that doesn't mean that..."

Chewbacca cut him off. "*You've been to Dagobah recently?*" he asked R2D2.

R2 responded in the affirmative. Chewbacca began to get an idea. "*Was Master Jedi Yoda still there?*"

Threepio translated the little droids response. "Yes, he was there," Threepio told the wookiee. "He was training Master Luke. Do you know this Jedi Master, Chewbacca?"

Chewbacca ignored him, as the wheels in his furry head began to turn. Yoda was the only remaining Jedi to have survived the Jedi purges. He had been one of the greatest Jedi of his time. If anyone could sort out this mess, he could.

"Where are you going?" Threepio asked, following Chewbacca as he left the room.

"*I'm going to Dagobah,*" Chewbacca responded. "*And you're **not** coming.*"

Threepio stopped in his tracks. "Well!" he exclaimed, watching the retreating wookiee.

"Father, can I talk to you?"

Anakin looked up at his son. "Of course," he replied. "Sit down."

Luke took a seat across from his father, not even sure where to begin.

"Father, I'm worried," Luke began without preamble.

"We're all worried, Luke," Anakin replied. "But I'm not about to let any harm come to your mother or your brother."

"Brother??" Luke asked. "You know that the baby is a boy?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he replied with a smile. "So set your mind at ease."

"Father, I'm worried about you as well," Luke replied. "About what this crisis is doing to you. I'm sensing such anger, such...darkness in you that it frightens me. I'm worried that you may slip back to the Dark Side."

Anakin frowned. "I *am* angry, Luke," he replied. "There's no doubt of that. But can you blame me?"

"No, of course not!" Luke replied. "I'm angry too; we're all angry and worried about Mother. But that isn't what I'm talking about, and I think you know it. I'm talking about seeing glimpses of Darth Vader in you. I know how much you love Mother, and I also know it was the fear of losing her that pushed you to the Dark Side all those years ago. I... I don't want to lose you, Father," Luke said, his desperation clear in his eyes. "None of us could stand to lose you again."

Anakin could see how afraid his son was, and realized that he was right; the Dark Side had been beckoning him, taunting him lately, he could not deny it. He had entertained thoughts of vengeance, of violent retribution since finding out about Padmé's abduction; thoughts like that were what lead him to the Dark Side so many years ago. *I cannot let that happen again... never.*

"You're right," Anakin said at last. "I'm sorry Luke, I'm sorry for the way I lashed out at you on Tatooine. I know you are concerned, and I know that were it not for you anchoring me right now I may already have slipped back." He put a hand on his son's arm. "I promise you that I will not give in to the negative feelings that I have been experiencing lately. I swear to you that I will not let the Darkness within me win."

Luke smiled. "That means a lot to me, Father," he said. "I want you to know that I am with you in this fight, and will do everything I can to help you win it."

Anakin smiled. "You are a true Jedi, Luke," he said, pride and love filling him. "What would I do without you?"

"Let's hope we never have to find out," Luke replied.

"Any idea how to get on board?" Han asked as they approached the Rebel command ship.

"Leave it to me," Anakin replied.

Han vacated the pilot's seat and allowed Anakin to take over. He, Luke and Leia watched with baited breath as Anakin used the Force to manipulate their way into the hangar bay of the command ship.

"*Still* don't believe in the Force, Han?" Luke asked with a smile.

Han shrugged. "Can't argue with results like that," he replied begrudgingly. "Let's just see how long the trick lasts."

The four of them entered the command ship and immediately sought out a com screen.

"According to this, Mother is on board," Leia reported. But the next piece of information stopped her cold. She turned to her father, her dark eyes full of angst. "She's in the medical wing."

Anakin felt his entire body tense at this news. He looked at Luke, fighting to keep his word, to keep the dark side that beckoned to him.

"Take us to her," Anakin told his daughter at last.

Leia nodded. "This way," she said, setting off down the corridor.

Padmé had been brought to the small medical facility on the command ship, where she had been examined by the resident physician there. Her symptoms had subsided, but the doctor wanted to keep her for observation regardless. She had been given something to help her sleep, and had been sleeping for nearly an hour when Mon Mothma entered the room.

"How is she?" she asked the medical droid who was present in the room at the time.

"She is resting," it replied.

"And the child?" Mothma asked.

"He is stable," it answered.

Mothma breathed a sigh of relief. She'd had no idea that Padmé was pregnant.

"Is the child out of danger?" she asked the droid.

"It is too early to say," the droid replied. "If the symptoms do not recur within the next 24 hours I would say so. But until then, we have to consider his life to be tenuous, and prevent his mother from any further stress."

Mon Mothma nodded her understanding, a pang of guilt hitting her hard as she realized that the stress the droid was referring to was brought on by her. *If I'd known she was pregnant... would I have done anything different? The fate of the galaxy is hanging in the balance... is the life of one child worth more than the well being of an entire galaxy?*

"Yes, it is."

Mon Mothma turned around quickly and was astonished to see Anakin Skywalker standing in the door, flanked by his two children and Han Solo.

"What... what did you say?" she stammered stupidly, too shocked to say anything else.

Anakin walked towards her, keeping a tight rein on his emotions, on the anger that threatened to erupt from him at any moment. "I said yes, the life of one child is worth more than the well being of a galaxy," he said, seeing how shocked she was that he had been able to read her thoughts so effortlessly. "When that child is hers and mine."

Mon Mothma's eyes darted from Anakin to Luke, then to Leia. Each of them was watching her, various levels of anger in their eyes. It was Leia who frightened her most however; she had never seen the princess so full of hatred.

"How did you get on board this ship?" Mothma asked at last, finding her wits.

“Seems a little irrelevant since we’re on board, doesn’t it?” asked Han.

“You have the nerve to ask us what we are doing here after sending someone to kidnap our mother?” Leia asked angrily. “After abducting a pregnant woman at blaster point??”

“I didn’t know she was pregnant,” Mon Mothma replied. “I only found out just now.”

“The fact that she is pregnant only exacerbates the situation,” Anakin said. ‘You abducted my wife, the mother of my children. I am not going to let you get away with that, Mothma.’ He turned to Han. “Take her,” he said, stepping over to the bed where Padmé was asleep.

“Where are you taking me?” Mon Mothma asked as Han took her by the arm.

“It only seems fitting that you be our guest, don’t’ you think?” Leia replied, turning to face Mothma. “After all the kind hospitality you have extended to my family.”

Mon Mothma shook her head. “You are truly your father’s daughter now, aren’t you Princess?” she replied.

“Why thank you,” Leia replied, smiling broadly. ‘That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me!’ She looked up at Han. “Take her away,” she said.

“With pleasure,” Han replied. “Let’s go, commander.”

Anakin stood at Padmé’s side, concentrating on the tiny life within her. To his relief, the fetus seemed healthy and thriving, his Force signature already unmistakable, even at this early stage of life. Anakin found himself growing emotional as he connected with his unborn son, his heart already full of love for the child.

“Is she alright?” Luke asked as he and Leia came to stand by Anakin’s side.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied softly. ‘They both are.’ He looked up at Luke and Leia. “Your brother is beautiful,” he said with a smile. “So beautiful.”

Leia smiled, amazed. “You can see him?” he asked.

Anakin looked down at Padmé. “No, not in the way you mean,” he replied. ‘It’s his... spirit, I suppose you’d say, that I can see, that I can sense. His Force presence,’ he explained. “It reminds me of yours, Luke” he added, looking back up at his son.

“Something’s going on out there,” Leia said, looking over at the door suddenly, a frown on her face. “Han is in trouble!” she ran to the door, grabbing her lightsaber from her belt as she did so.

“Leia, wait!” Luke cried, running after her.

Leia’s instincts were correct, for in the corridor Han was indeed in trouble. He was trying desperately to hold off a group of rebel guards who had been alerted to the presence of intruders aboard the ship. Leia jumped into the melee, deflecting the blasts with her lightsaber, surprising herself with the innate skill she seemed to possess. Soon Luke joined her, and in a moment the two Skywalker twins had turned the tide of the battle, driving back the enemy fire and enabling Han to get to get out of harm’s way.

“You get to the ship,” Luke told his twin. “I’ll get rid of the rest of them.”

“Right,” Leia said, running down the corridor in the direction Han had taken. She rounded the corridor and stopped dead in her tracks. Han was slumped against a wall, holding a hand up to blood soaked shoulder.

“Han!!” she cried as she rushed over to him. His face was pale when she reached up, and she grabbed his arms as he started to lose consciousness and slip down to the floor.

“What happened??” she cried, easing him to the floor, trying to keep calm, trying not to let the terror within her drive her mad.

“She... she had a weapon...” he muttered. “I didn’t even suspect...”

“Where is she Han? Where did she go?” Leia asked, her fear quickly being replaced by anger.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice barely audible as his ability to remain conscious slipped away.

Leia took off her jacket and tore a strip of fabric from it, fashioning a crude tourniquet for Han’s wound. It was nasty looking, but she reasoned that it was far enough away from any vital organs not too be fatal. Yet, the thought of him in pain, the thought of him suffering was all that she needed to drive her anger to new heights. Her hands trembled as she tied the tourniquet. Then she planted a kiss on his brow and stood up, wiping the blood on her pants. She looked up when she heard footsteps coming down the hall, and readied herself for combat. When she saw her twin brother, she relaxed.

“What happened?!” Luke exclaimed when he saw Han.

“That bitch Mon Mothma attacked him,” Leia growled, igniting her saber. “And I mean to make her pay for it,” she said, running down the corridor in the opposite direction.

“Leia, no!!!” Luke cried after her. But she wasn’t about to stop. Mon Mothma had crossed the line too many times, and now, Leia thought resolutely, she would pay for that mistake. *I will make sure of it*, she thought grimly as she checked the comm. screen for her whereabouts.

You’ll regret messing with me, Mon Mothma, she thought as she made her way through the labyrinth of corridors. *You will rue the day you messed with me.*

Chapter 72

CHAPTER 72

With difficulty Luke made his way back to the medical sector, his unconscious friend slung over his shoulder. Anakin looked up when he heard the door open and ran over to help his son.

“He’s not...” Anakin began, fearing the worst.

“No, just unconscious,” Luke explained as he and his father carried Han to a bed.

“Where is Leia?” Anakin asked, growing more alarmed.

“She’s gone after Mon Mothma,” Luke replied, wiping the sweat from his brow. “She did this to Han.”

Anakin frowned, sensing anger emanating from Leia.

“She means to kill her, Father,” Luke told him.

“Not if I can help it,” Anakin said, rushing to the door.

Hurry Father, Luke thought ardently. He summoned a medical droid to attend to Han’s wound and stood watching it, his mind and heart in turmoil. *Don’t do it, Leia... don’t give in to hate...*

“Luke? What are you doing here?”

Luke turned to see his mother looking up at him, a puzzled expression on her face. He went to her side at once.

“We came for you,” he told her, smiling and taking her hand. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright,” she said, looking around the room. She stopped, heart in her throat when she saw Han being attended by a medical droid.

“What happened to Han?” she asked, growing anxious. “Where is Leia? Where is your father?”

Luke hesitated before answering Padmé, worried what the stress of knowing the truth would do to her in her delicate state.

“Luke, tell me what’s going on,” Padmé said, her voice firm and authoritative.

“Father went after Leia,” Luke replied at last. “And Leia went after Mon Mothma. Mon Mothma is the one who shot Han.”

Padmé’s eyes widened at the implications of this dire news struck her. “Anakin will kill her for what she has done,” she said quietly.

Luke shook his head. “It’s not him I’m worried about.”

Anakin did not need the ship's internal sensors to tell him where to find his daughter. The anger and hatred was radiating from her in dark, concentric circles, acting like a homing beacon to draw him closer. He ran through the corridors, drawing closer and closer to the eye of the storm, willing his legs to move faster.

"Stop right there!"

Anakin did not even stop, but merely pushed the pair of security guards with a wave of his hand. He was not going to let anyone get in his way, for he knew that if he were too late, his daughter's soul would be forfeit. He recalled another day many years ago when he had made the wrong choice, choosing to save the life of Palpatine instead of a brother Jedi, and losing his soul in the process. *I won't let Leia make the same mistake I did... I won't allow the Darkness to claim my child!*

Leia stood outside of the room where she had tracked her quarry. She steadied her nerves, grasped her weapon tightly in her hand, and activated the door. It was locked. This only served to fuel her anger. Leia pushed her hand against the smooth metal door, channeling all her anger and frustration in what she assumed was a futile gesture. To her surprise and amazement, the door burst open, falling into the room with a loud clang. Inside, Mon Mothma jumped to her feet, shocked by what she had just witnessed. Her shock soon turned to fear when she saw Leia standing in the doorway, brandishing a Jedi weapon. Slowly Mon Mothma stood up, her hand reaching for the small blaster she kept concealed in her voluminous sleeve.

"Drop it," Leia commanded before Mon Mothma could even take aim. She froze as Leia moved toward her.

"I said *drop it!!*" Leia yelled, throwing Mothma against the wall with a powerful Force push. The rebel commander struggled to regain her footing, her terror augmented by the sinister look in Leia's eyes. *Her eyes... they're... yellow...* Mothma noticed in horror. *What is happening to her??*

"Now let's be reasonable about this," she began, trying to remain calm. "I swear I didn't know your mother was pregnant, otherwise I'd never have..."

"I don't want to hear your excuses!!" Leia cried. "You have caused enough pain to my family, to my loved ones. I won't let you harm anyone I love again!" she declared, stepping closer, brandishing her weapon high above her head.

Mon Mothma panicked, and pulled out her blaster, firing wildly in Leia's direction. Leia deflected the laser blasts with speed and accuracy that surprised even her. With a swipe of her weapon she sliced Mothma's wrist, sending her hand and the blaster in it to the floor. Mothma screamed in agony, falling to her knees.

"That was for Han!" Leia told her, enjoying the sight of her enemy's agony. "And this is for my mother!"

"Leia, NO!!"

Leia stopped mere centimeters from Mon Mothma's neck, the anger and hatred making her hands shake.

Mothma looked over to the doorway to see Anakin Skywalker standing there. *Now I will die for sure...* she thought dully.

“Leia, lower your weapon.”

Leia turned to her father, and he was horrified to see the darkness in her face. “She tried to kill Han!!” she told him. “She almost killed my little brother!! My mother!!! She deserves to die!”

Anakin walked over to her slowly. “Yes, she does,” he agreed, casting a quick glance at Mothma who was close to passing out by now. “But that is not the Jedi way. That is the way of the Sith, Leia. You are acting like a Sith, and the Dark Side is controlling you.”

Leia frowned. “No it isn’t!” She insisted. “I would never allow that to happen!”

Anakin shook his head. “I thought that too at one time,” he said. “But the Dark Side is insidious, Leia; it feeds on your anger, on your hatred. Don’t make the same mistake I did; don’t let it win!”

Leia looked back at Mon Mothma, who was now unconscious on the floor, at the woman’s severed hand lying on the floor beside her, and suddenly realized that her father was right. The surge of power that had enabled her to open the door, to push Mon Mothma across the room, that power had come from the Dark Side. *What have I become??* Leia thought in horror as she dropped the lightsaber to the floor. *What have I done? What would I have done if my father hadn’t stopped me??*

Anakin sensed the shifting within her Force aura and approached her once again. “Leia, look at me.”

She turned to face her father once again, and this time he was relieved to see that the darkness had left her, that her eyes were once again their natural hue of dark brown. She looked up at him as tears filled them. “Father...” she said softly.

Anakin wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. “I know, Leia,” he said gently. “I know what you’re going through; I know what you are feeling. But you stopped before it went too far. Everything is going to be okay.”

Leia sobbed against her father’s chest, feeling for the first time complete empathy for what he had suffered all those years ago. *He turned to the Dark Side for the love of my mother, for the love of Luke and me... now I understand how easily that could have happened, for it nearly happened to me...*

“Let’s get a medic down here,” Anakin said at last. “Time for the bloodshed to end.”

Leia looked up at him and nodded, her face wet with tears.

“Let’s go, I’m sure Han is anxious to see you,” Anakin said with a smile.

Leia smiled through her tears. “Thank you, Dad,” she said. “Thank you for saving me.”

Anakin nodded. “Come,” he said, taking her hand. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 73

CHAPTER 73

"What's going to happen to me?" Leia asked her father as they waited for the medical team to arrive.

Anakin wasn't sure how to answer her. Mon Mothma was certainly a vindictive person; yet she had nearly killed Han, so would she be able to see that they were, in a bizarre sense, even now?

"I don't know," he replied at last, stroking her face gently. "But whatever happens, you know I'll be right there with you, Leia. I'm not going to let you go through anything alone."

Leia smiled. "Thanks," she said softly. "I know you won't."

Just then the door opened, and a pair of medical droids carrying a floating gurney entered the room and hurried over to the unconscious Mon Mothma. Anakin and Leia were about to leave when Generals Reikan and Dodonna stepped into the doorway. Anakin and Leia looked at one another, wondering what was coming next.

"My daughter was simply retaliating for Mothma's attack upon Han, and Padmé's abduction," Anakin explained.

Reikan shook his head. "We're not here to make judgment on Leia," he said. "We're here to make sure that she is alright. We heard about what happened."

"I'm fine," Leia replied. "I'm more concerned about Han. Is he alright?"

"As far as we know," Dodonna replied.

"Why don't we go check on him?" suggested Anakin, who was more than anxious to see Padmé.

"Good idea," Leia replied, turning to her father and taking his hand.

As they walked through the corridor, Reikan finally worked up the nerve to speak to Anakin.

"I want to assure you, Anakin, that my comrades and I were very much against Mon Mothma's radical move to abduct your wife," he said uneasily, hoping that Anakin would understand.

Anakin looked at the general. "But you allowed it to happen, nonetheless," he remarked.

Dodonna spoke up. "Yes, we did," he admitted awkwardly. "And we should have put a stop to her plans before things went this far. She has become obsessed, irrational; and we should have taken measures to curb her power. I only hope that the damage she had caused is not irreparable, and will not prevent us from sitting down and talking rationally."

Anakin considered the man's words, sensing the sincerity behind them. It seemed the only thing these men were guilty of was cowardice, for they had lacked the backbone to stand up to Mon Mothma when her lust for revenge against the Skywalker family pushed her beyond the edge of reason. Would they now be willing to remove her from the picture completely? Would they be strong enough to do so?

"Is that what you want?" Anakin asked at last.

"Yes," Dodonna replied. "It's about time, don't you think? Perhaps if we had talked to one another sooner none of this would have happened."

"A moot point," Anakin remarked dryly. "Besides, the level of mistrust on the part of the Rebel Alliance where I am concerned precluded such a thing. I trust that you see now that my family and I are more than worthy of trust."

"We're beginning to see just what caliber of people you and your family truly are," Reikan commented earnestly. "But, understandably, we still have many questions. We don't begin to understand your goals for the galaxy; but we would very much like to be a part of the goals."

"Of course," Anakin conceded. "And I think it is time those questions were addressed. If there is ever to be peace in the galaxy, we must begin to communicate openly."

Upon reaching the medical facility, Anakin was thrilled to see his wife up and about. He rushed to her, embracing her tightly.

"Thank the Force you're alright," he said, realizing all of a sudden just how long it had been since he had seen her. He kissed her tenderly, taking her face in his hands.

Padmé looked up at him. "What happened, Ani?" she asked. "Luke told me that Leia was going after Mon Mothma. Please tell me you got there in time."

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he replied. 'But not a minute too soon,' he added with a frown. "We nearly lost our daughter, Padmé; we nearly lost her to the Dark Side."

Padmé frowned. "No," she whispered. "Not my Leia," she said.

"I was able to prevent the worst," Anakin assured her. "I can help her, Padmé; I know what she is feeling, I understand her. She will not follow the same path that I did, I swear to you."

Padmé smiled, thankful beyond measure to hear her Ani speak those words. *The darkness is gone now, she realized with joy and relief. He has truly returned to us now... he has defeated the Dark Side once and for all.*

Just then the medical team brought in Mon Mothma. Padmé watched, feeling sick inside when she saw the severed hand lying beside her on the gurney. *My little girl did that... what would she have done if Anakin hadn't come in time??*

"Han!" Leia exclaimed as Han started to come around. He opened his eyes and looked around, discombobulated for a moment.

"Where the hell am I?" he asked, looking up at Luke who stood by his side.

Leia and Luke smiled. "That last place you'd want to be," Luke replied. "Recovering in the med ward."

Han frowned "What happened?" he asked, and then he spied Mon Mothma on the other side of the room being attended to by medical droids.

"Oh yeah," he muttered. "What happened to *her*?" he asked.

Leia looked over her shoulder. "My bad temper," she said quietly. She turned back to Han. "But everything is going to be okay," she said. "Thanks to my father," she added, looking at Anakin.

Anakin smiled and put his arm around Padmé.

"Let's hope so," he commented. "We still have a long way to go, and a lot of work to do."

"We'll be waiting for you in the conference room," General Dodonna told Anakin. "Your children know the way."

Anakin nodded as the two generals took their leave.

"Will somebody tell me what's going on around here?" Han asked.

"A good question, this is."

Everyone looked over to the doorway to see Chewbacca with the diminutive Jedi Master, Yoda.

"Master Yoda!" Luke said with a smile, coming over to him at once.

"Much has happened since you left Dagobah, young Luke," Yoda remarked, looking around the room. "Much of it I have sensed," he added, looking at Anakin.

Anakin smiled. "It has been a long time, Master Yoda," he commented.

Yoda nodded. "Far too long, Anakin," the ancient Jedi master concurred. "You have done well, young one. The Chosen One, you truly have become."

Anakin's smile grew at these simple yet powerful words from Yoda. "Thanks to my family," he replied. "Without their support and their love, I would have remained in the Darkness."

"Perhaps too hasty the Council was to forbid attachments," Yoda commented, looking at Padmé. "Perhaps the love of a family is more important than we realized."

"I can vouch for that, Master," Anakin said, looking down at his wife with a smile. "Perhaps something to think about when we reestablish the Jedi Order."

"Perhaps," Yoda agreed, nodding sagely.

"The Rebel leaders are waiting for us," Luke reminded everyone. "I don't think we should keep them waiting any more."

"Luke is right," Padmé said. "Time to start talking."

Anakin nodded. "Indeed," he replied. "Lead the way," he said to Luke.

Chapter 74

CHAPTER 74

Anakin and his family, along with Han, Chewbacca and Yoda made their way to the conference room where the remainder of the Rebel leaders had assembled.

"You're sure you're up to this?" Anakin asked Padmé.

"Yes, of course," she replied.

"I don't want you to overdo it," Anakin insisted. "Not in your condition."

Luke and Leia exchanged a smile. Their father's solicitousness was amusing, and yet touching, for it showed a side of their father they were not accustomed to.

"Ani, please stop worrying," Padmé told him at last. "I've been pregnant before, remember?" she reminded him with a smile.

"I know," Anakin replied. 'But I was away at the war for most of that pregnancy,' he reminded her. "I didn't get the chance to fuss over you," he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "I see," she replied. "So you're going to make up for that with this one, is that it?"

Anakin nodded. "Exactly," he replied. "So get used to it."

Padmé smiled and hugged his arm. "I think I can do that," she replied.

General Reikan, General Dodonna and Admiral Ackbar all sat at the long conference table awaiting their guests. The three Rebel leaders were nervous, not really knowing what to expect. If the actions of Anakin Skywalker were any indication, then they had greatly underestimated the emperor, and could possibly expect him to be benevolent and cooperative. Yet, the actions of Leia Organa concerned them deeply. Granted, she had every right to be furious with Mon Mothma for the horrific acts of violence she had committed against both Padmé and Han Solo; yet the nature of her actions, the darkness of her revenge troubled them greatly. All three of them suspected strongly that had Anakin not shown up when he had, that their comrade would be dead right now.

And then there was Padmé Amidala. Padmé *Skywalker*. It still amazed them that she and Skywalker were married, and had been married for more than 20 years. Most of those years they were apart, the dark years that Skywalker had lived as Darth Vader, and yet she took him back. *She took him back...* Clearly there were many facets of this whole situation that they still were ignorant of. It was their hope that they would soon be enlightened.

"Please, sit down," Ackbar said as the group entered the room.

Anakin pulled out a chair for his wife and sat beside her. It was clear not just to the Rebel commanders but everyone in the room the level of devotion Skywalker had for his wife.

Clearly this man was no longer the ruthless Sith Lord they had been fighting for two decades, for no Sith would be so tender, so devoted, so utterly in love as Skywalker obviously was.

"Well," Reikan began, deciding to take the initiative. "This is certainly long over due, I'd say."

Anakin nodded. "I would have to agree," he commented.

"I think it would be best if we started at the beginning," Padmé said, sensing how uncertain the Rebels were. "You certainly have a lot of questions, I'm sure."

Ackbar nodded. "Yes, an understatement that," he concurred. 'First of all, how did this transformation take place?' he asked, addressing the question to Anakin. "Surely you did not wear that dreadful mask all those years for no reason."

"No, of course not," Anakin replied, a little annoyed by the stupidity of the question. "I had massive reconstructive surgery on Kamino several months ago."

"We know about that," Reikan replied. "I think what Admiral Ackbar means is, when did you stop becoming Darth Vader? Not just in the physical sense. When did you become Anakin Skywalker again?"

Anakin hesitated before responding. The question was not an easy one. *When indeed...*

"I believe my...rebirth has been a gradual one," Anakin replied. 'Not something that happened all at once. I believe that today was the end of Darth Vader once and for all, though. When I saw in my daughter the reflection of what I had become all those years ago, that destroyed any vestiges of Darkness left within me. But I know that were it not for the love and support of my family, I never would have won the fight,' he concluded, looking at his wife with a smile. "They never gave up on me, they believed in me, and that was the impetus I needed to fight and to destroy Vader."

"Unprecedented this is," Yoda spoke up at this point.

"What do you mean, Master Yoda?" asked General Dodonna.

"Never before has a Sith turned from the Dark Side," Yoda explained. "Believed all my life I have that once you start down the dark path forever would it dominate your destiny. Proven me wrong, Anakin has. The Chosen One, you are, Anakin. Hope you have given the galaxy. You and your family, the future of the Jedi you are."

Anakin was moved by Yoda's words, and he sensed a new found humility in the ancient Jedi. Perhaps a lifetime spent in exile had shown him the error of his ways, shown him that the Jedi were *not* infallible, and that the precepts and codes that they so stringently protected were too rigid to stand the test of time.

"You obviously have a plan in mind," Reikan commented to Anakin and Padmé. "Since you have taken control of the Empire, you have both been extremely busy. What is it you are trying to accomplish?"

"It is quite simple, really," Padmé replied. "Dismantle the Empire, bit by bit. Return power to the individual systems; divest it from the greedy bureaucrats who have spent the past two decades bleeding the galaxy dry."

“Simple?” Reikan replied, his eyebrows raised. ‘Doesn’t sound simple to me!’ “Why else do you think I’ve assumed the position of Emperor?” Anakin asked. “Why else to you think I’ve pretended to be Darth Vader? So long as the rest of the Empire believes that I am still he, then they will do whatever I command. Don’t you see that?”

Ackbar nodded. “Yes, it’s brilliant,” he commented. “Like an implosion, destruction from within.”

“Exactly,” Padmé replied. “And once the infrastructure of the Empire is taken away, the rest will fall into place. The Senate will take over, along with the rulers of the individual planets. Soon there will be no need for an emperor at all. That will be the day that Democracy will return to the galaxy. For good.”

“Noble goals,” Dodonna commented. “But is it possible? Do you really think the bureaucrats of the Empire will go along with it? That they won’t suspect what you are up to?”

“They might,” Anakin replied. “But that is why we are removing the dangerous elements now, before our plan gets too far along, and our goals become too obvious. I have no intention of having a civil war on my hands, General. I’ve had enough fighting in my life to last a hundred life times. The galaxy needs peace, and I mean to see that it gets just that.”

“The question is, what can we do to help you?” Reikan asked.

Anakin smiled. “I was rather hoping you’d ask me that.”

Chapter 75

CHAPTER 75

"Well, isn't this cozy."

All eyes turned to the door to see Mon Mothma standing there.

"The mighty Galactic Emperor and his family conversing with the lowly Rebels."

General Reikan stood up. "If this is going to be your attitude, then you are not welcome here," he told Mon Mothma.

"Who are you to tell me that??" she retorted hotly. "I started the Rebel Alliance! Were *you* there when it all began?? Were any of you?"

"I was," Padmé spoke up. "Your memory is a little faulty if you think you were the only founding member of the Alliance. I was there too, if you recall."

"That may be," Mon Mothma replied. "But you certainly abandoned the Cause quickly enough! You haven't exactly been active in the Rebellion, have you Padmé?"

"How did you expect me to do that?" Padmé retorted angrily. "I have spent the past 22 years hiding from Palpatine, moving from one system to the next to evade his spies!"

"That was a situation of your own making," Mon Mothma replied coldly. "Perhaps if you'd not been sneaking around, compromising your integrity and that of the Jedi Order you'd not have ended up in such a perilous position."

"Enough!" Anakin shouted, rising to his feet. He turned to Mon Mothma, his blue eyes bright with anger. "I will *not* sit by and allow you to attack my wife this way!"

"Nor will we allow it," Luke said, as he and Leia stood up and joined their father.

"Get her out of here," Leia told Dodonna, her eyes not leaving Mon Mothma. She could feel the rage welling up within her, and had to fight to keep it in check. "Before someone says or does something regrettable."

"Is that a threat, Princess?" Mon Mothma asked as the two guards at the door moved towards her.

Leia shook her head. "No, not a threat," she replied. "A promise."

The guards took Mon Mothma's arms. "Let's go, Commander."

Mon Mothma yanked herself free. "Not until I see that she is charged for what she did to me," she declared, pointing at Leia.

"And what about what you did to Han?" Leia retorted angrily. "And my mother??"

"Mothma, you have truly lost your mind," Reikan said, shaking his head. "Don't you realize that you would be dead right now if it weren't for Anakin here? And that the

Skywalkers are the best chance for peace in the galaxy? Are you so blinded by your own jealousy and vindictiveness that you can't see the truth of it all?"

"You are the one who has lost his mind," Mon Mothma retorted. 'All of you,' she added, looking at the other Rebel commanders. "If you think you can trust a Skywalker, then you truly are mad."

Padmé shook her head. "What happened to you, Mon? You used to be such a great leader, such a reasonable wise person. When did you stop believing in the truth?"

"Don't lecture me, Padmé *Skywalker*," Mothma returned. "You who have compromised everything you believed in for the glamour of a life of intrigue and romance. You lied to everyone, broke every rule and convention there was, and yet you have the gall to say to *me* what happened??"

"That's it!" Leia said the anger inside of her breaking loose. "Shut your lying mouth!" she shouted, clenching her fist tightly.

Mon Mothma felt her throat constrict, and her hands flew to her neck. Anakin realized at once what was happening.

"Release her Leia!" he said, taking her by the shoulders. "Do it!" Alarmed by the turn of events, Yoda intervened. With a small gesture of his hand, he pushed Leia, not enough to harm her, but enough to knock her off balance. Leia stumbled back against her brother, who took hold of her tightly. Mon Mothma fell to her knees, gasping for breath. She looked up at Leia, daggers in her eyes.

"You'll pay for this, you little bitch!" she rasped. "I'll see to it!"

The guards hauled her to her feet and escorted her out the door, taking advantage of her temporary weakness to get her out of the room.

"Luke, what is wrong with me?" Leia said, looking up at her brother. "Why am I doing these things?"

Yoda walked over to her, leaning heavily on his gnarled gimmer stick. "The Dark Side is quick to join you, young Leia," he told her solemnly. 'Resist its lure, you must.' He turned to Anakin. "Your father will teach you, of that I am certain, for he has learned to resist that temptation."

Anakin nodded a frown on his brow. "Yes, I will," he replied. "I won't let the Dark Side win again, Master Yoda."

Yoda nodded sagely. "Of this I have no doubt, Anakin," he replied warmly. "Train your daughter you will, teach her the dangers of the Dark Side. A powerful Jedi she will be."

Anakin looked at Leia and smiled. "Yes, I know she will," he replied softly.

Reikan, Dodonna and Ackbar had watched the proceedings with shock and alarm. While they recognized that the Jedi had certain abilities, none of them truly understood the nature of those powers. *With a Jedi knight as powerful as Anakin Skywalker as an ally, the Empire will surely be destroyed*, they reflected.

“Mon Mothma has obviously lost her mind,” Ackbar commented. “And I apologize for her cruel outburst.”

Padmé shook her head. “You needn’t apologize,” she said. “I think we are all more concerned about what she may do to undermine our efforts than a few nasty comments.”

“Agreed,” Reikan said. “But leave that to us. She is our problem, and I assure you we will not allow her to interfere in our joint efforts.”

“Unpredictable she is,” Yoda commented. “Madness can be very dangerous. Watched she must be.”

“She will be,” Dodonna replied. “There is too much riding on this new alliance to allow her to jeopardize it.”

“So it’s decided then,” Anakin spoke up. “Padmé and I will return to Coruscant with Luke and Leia, while Chewbacca and Han remain here as liaisons.”

Ackbar nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “We will ensure that all hostilities on Imperial outposts stop. It is time to concentrate our efforts elsewhere.”

“Yes,” Padmé agreed. “The formation of the Senate is a huge undertaking. Leia and I could use your help with that, particularly now,” she added, running a hand over her abdomen.

Anakin smiled and took her hand. “That’s right,” he said. “I’m not going to let you work yourself ragged, Padmé, not a chance.”

“I rather had that impression,” she replied with a smile.

“Search, I will, for Force sensitives,” Yoda told Anakin as they walked through the corridor of the Rebel command ship. “The Jedi Order will be reborn.”

Anakin nodded, as memories of the very reason the Jedi Order had died flooded his mind.

“I am so ashamed,” Anakin said softly. “I destroyed the Order, Master Yoda. I killed so many Jedi, so many younglings... I ignored their pleas for mercy and slaughtered them like animals.”

Yoda listened to Anakin’s confession, knowing that he needed to speak, needed to release his guilt.

“There are no words I know that can apologize to you, Master,” Anakin continued. He stopped and faced the ancient master. He got down on one knee so that he could look Yoda in the eyes. ‘I promise you that I will do everything I can to atone for what I did,’ he averred. “Even if it takes the rest of my life to do it.”

Yoda nodded. “The Chosen One you are, Anakin,” he said. “Perhaps your fall into Darkness, a part of the prophecy it was. Now that you know the power and the danger of the Dark Side, help you it will to teach future Jedi of those dangers.”

Anakin nodded, trying to take comfort from Yoda’s words. “It will,” he agreed. ‘My daughter is in danger from the Dark Side,’ he reflected sadly. “I will not let her lose this fight, Master. I can’t lose my child to the Dark Side.”

“Strong with the Force she is,” Yoda remarked. “A struggle it will be for her, just as it was for you. But she has you, Anakin, and Padmé and Luke to help her. Your love will defeat the darkness.”

“Just as theirs defeated the darkness within me,” Anakin realized.

Yoda nodded. “You are right, Anakin,” he agreed. “Love is the opposite of hate, and Darkness thrives on hate; logical it is that it would be destroyed by love.”

Anakin smiled. “Leia has many people who love her,” he told the Jedi Master. “She will be fine.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Yoda concurred with a smile.

Chapter 76

CHAPTER 76

"I'm worried about you, sweetheart. Are you going to be alright?"

Leia nodded. "Yes, don't worry," she told Han. "I know I've been acting a little unusual lately, but..."

"A little unusual??" Han repeated. "Leia, you've been acting like Vader. I've never seen you this way, and I'm really worried. I wish your father hadn't asked me to stay here; I feel like I should be with you."

Leia smiled. "I know," she said, caressing his face gently. "I wish with the same thing; but we all have our part in this, Han. Besides, it's not like we're going to be apart forever. My mother needs me right now, especially with the baby coming."

"And you need your father," Han remarked. "He seems to understand what you're going through."

"He does," Leia agreed. "Remember, he was seduced by the Dark Side all those years ago. He is the only person who has ever turned back from the Dark Side," she added, the pride evident in her voice.

"Your father is an amazing guy," Han agreed. "I know he's the best one to help you get over this, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to miss you."

"I will miss you too," she said, taking his hands. "I'll miss your crooked smile, your cockiness, your hair brained ideas," she teased.

Han laughed. "Yeah, yeah," he said, pulling her close to him. "I love you too."

"It's a long trip to Coruscant, you should try to get some sleep," Anakin told his wife as the ship settled into hyperspace.

Padmé hated to admit how tired she was, but realized that it would be futile to do so. Anakin had always been able to read her, and now that she was pregnant again, his protectiveness had increased exponentially. Padmé had always been a very independent woman, and normally chafed under such attention; yet, she knew that for Anakin this was a chance for him to try and make up for his absence during her pregnancy with Luke and Leia. Besides, it was nice having him fuss over her, she'd decided. It revealed a side of him that she had not seen in far too long.

"Will you sit with me?" she asked, taking his hand. "Keep me company?"

"Of course," he replied at once. "Think of me as your human pillow."

Padmé laughed. "You're not soft enough to be a pillow, Ani," she said, wrapping her arms around his arm.

Anakin smiled. "Well, you wouldn't want me to be soft, would you?" he teased her.

“Ani!” she replied, shocked by his comment. “You are so bad!”

“What?” he asked, his face the picture of innocence. “I simply meant you wouldn’t want me all flabby and out of shape; what were *you* thinking??”

Padmé’s face went pink and she laughed. “You know very well,” she muttered. “And I *know* that is what you meant. You just love to tease me, that’s all.”

Anakin laughed. “Only because you are so adorable when you blush,” he told her, leaning over and kissing her. “Now, time for a nap,” he said as they reached the passenger lounge. He sat down and patted the cot beside him.

“Very well,” she said, sitting down. She lay down and put her head on Anakin’s lap, loving the masculine scent of him, the comforting feel on his strong hand as he stroked her hair gently.

“Ani, can you believe we’re going to have another baby?” she asked.

Anakin smiled. “Of course,” he replied. “We’re far from old, Padmé.”

“I suppose not,” she replied. “But still, we have two grown children. I didn’t really think that we would be having another child.”

“Well you know what causes that, Padmé,” he teased her.

Padmé giggled. “You are so bad,” she said, stifling a yawn. “What am I going to do with you?”

Anakin smiled, remembering how often she used to say that to him when they were first married. He was merciless in his teasing of her, but she enjoyed it, and eventually learned to dish it out. The passion between them was so deep, so strong; it seemed they could never get enough of one another. Time apart had not dampened that passion; indeed, Anakin found his desire for her just as ardent as when he had been a 20 year old. Being apart from her for the six weeks in the Outer Rim had been very difficult. He hated the thought of being apart from her again, though he realized that there was still much work to be done in the Outer Rim. The thought of sending Luke on his own had crossed his mind; but he knew that such a decision would be irresponsible, for Luke was new to this, and did not have the presence nor the reputation among the Imperial bureaucracy that Anakin did.

“Whatever you wish,” Anakin replied at last, stroking his wife’s silken hair. “I am yours to command.”

Padmé did not reply, however; so Anakin bent down to look at her face, smiling to see that she had already fallen asleep. He kissed her softly on the cheek. “Sleep well, beloved,” he whispered in her ear.

“Quite an eventful few days,” Luke commented as he and Leia sat over a cup of caff in the ship’s small galley.

Leia nodded, staring into her cup. She had never been so confused, and the jumble of emotions swirling in her heart was almost too much for her to handle. *I miss Han... when will I see him again? Am I truly like Vader?? Am I becoming what he was? Will I be able to stop myself from lashing out like that again??* These questions tore at her mind, giving her no rest, no peace.

“Leia, I know what you’re feeling,” Luke began tentatively, sensing his twin’s mental anguish. “I wish you would talk to me about it.”

Leia looked up at Luke. “You don’t know how I’m feeling, Luke,” she replied. “I wouldn’t wish that upon you. You’ve never been tempted to use the Dark Side, have you?”

Luke sighed. “No,” he answered truthfully. ‘Master Yoda pretty much scared that out of me on Dagobah,’ he added, recalling that terrible vision he’d had of Vader in the cave. Seeing his own face under the mask of Vader was truly terrifying, and it taught him well the danger that his aggressive tendencies could mean. “But that doesn’t mean that you can’t talk to me about how you’re feeling.”

“I suppose not,” Leia replied, casting her eyes down once again. ‘I’m afraid Luke,’ she said at last, her voice hushed. “I’m afraid of becoming what Father was. I can’t explain what it felt like to do those things I did,” she told him, looking back up at him. “It was like... like someone else was controlling me. The power came so easily, so quickly; I’d never imagined I was capable of such power.”

Luke listened, nodding in understanding. He remembered the first time he’d experienced the awesome power of the Force; it was a heady feeling, an incredible feeling; but one that didn’t come without a tremendous amount of effort and hard work.

“Master Yoda told me that the Dark Side was quick and easy,” Luke told his sister. ‘Quick to join you in a fight,’ he added. “Perhaps that is the reason the power came to you so easily. It makes it harder to resist.”

Leia nodded. “Yes, I know,” she replied. ‘But I will resist it, Luke,’ she averred. “I have no intention of becoming a Sith, don’t worry.”

Luke smiled. “I know you won’t,” he said. “Besides, neither Father nor I would let it happen. When I think of what happened to Father, I realize that he had no one to talk to about what he was feeling, no one who could empathize with him or reassure him; all he had was fear.”

“Yes, I’ve thought of that too,” Leia replied. “I understand him a lot better now, Luke; I can see why things happened the way they did. To think that he lived as Vader all those years; so lonely, so filled with remorse and pain. The thought of it is heart breaking to me now.”

Luke reached over and took her hand. “But he has us now,” he assured her, “and Mother. He won’t ever be lonely again.”

Leia smiled. “Don’t forget our baby brother,” she reminded him.

“Yes, him too,” Luke replied. He smiled. “I still can’t believe we’re going to have a little brother.”

“I’ve always thought of *you* as my little brother,” Leia told him. “Even though you were born first.”

Luke smiled. “Yeah, by a matter of minutes,” he replied. “In a way I’m envious of him; he’ll have what we never had— our parents to raise him.”

“That’s true,” Leia replied. ‘He will have lots of people doting on him,’ she said with a smile. “I for one can’t wait to spoil him rotten.”

Luke laughed. “Somehow I don’t think you’ll be the only one doing that. Father’s already got that I-can’t-wait-to-show-him-how-to-fly look in his eyes when he talks about him.”

Leia laughed. “Yes, I’ve noticed that. Well he’ll be one lucky little boy, that much is certain.”

Luke nodded. “Yes, he will. He’ll have the best parents, the best big sister…”

“The best big brother,” Leia put in. “Don’t forget that. I don’t know if I’ve told you recently Luke, but I love you. You are my best friend, and I’m so proud of you.”

Luke smiled. “I love you too, Leia. And I’m proud of you too. We’ll get through this, I promise. Just please, talk to me, okay? I don’t want you to think you can’t talk to me about this, even if I can’t relate, I can at least listen.”

Leia smiled and squeezed Luke’s hand. “Thanks Luke, that means a lot to me.”

“Hey, what are big brothers for?” Luke replied.

8

Chapter 77

CHAPTER 77

"I'll take over," Anakin announces as he entered the cockpit. "You may take a break."

The pilot of the ship exchanged a look of surprise with his copilot, but did not question the emperor. The two clones simply stood up and left the cockpit, bowing respectfully to Anakin as they passed him.

Anakin sat down at the controls. *Less than 3 hours now*, he noted as he checked the navi-computer. Padmé was sleeping in the passenger lounge, and Anakin was anxious to get her home. Even though she seemed fine, the scare she'd had hadn't left his mind. Padmé was almost 49 years of age; and while it wasn't unheard of for women her age to have a child, it wasn't terribly commonplace. Anakin worried that the stress of her position would compromise the pregnancy; and knowing Padmé, she wasn't one to back away from her duties. Perhaps the close call she'd had would force her to be more cautious. *She can be so damn stubborn sometimes*, he reflected.

"Want some company?"

Anakin looked up to see his daughter entering the cockpit. Surprised, and yet pleased, he gestured to the copilot's seat with his hand.

"Absolutely," he said as she sat down beside him. "Can't sleep?"

She shook her head. "No. Luke and Mother are sleeping; it was getting a little lonely back there."

"I've never been able to sleep well," Anakin commented. "I guess you inherited that from me."

"Well Luke certainly didn't," Leia replied. "He can fall asleep anywhere, anytime."

Anakin laughed. "A good quality to have," he commented. "I envy him." He studied her profile for a moment as she studied the controls in front of her.

"I'm sorry I had to ask Han to stay back on the command ship," he said, sensing how much Leia was missing her scruffy Corellian pilot. "I hope you realize why I did it."

Leia looked up at him. "I do," she replied, nodding her head. "I know how delicate a situation this is. Now isn't the time to let personal feelings get in the way."

Anakin smiled. *So much like her mother...* "That doesn't mean that they don't," he said in reply. "If you're anything like me, and I suspect you are, then you have a difficult time separating your feelings from other aspects of your life. I know I always have."

"I try not to let them get in the way, but sometimes they just... take over," she replied, grateful to be able to talk to someone who actually understood how she felt. "Like back on

the command ship; I don't know what came over me when I attacked Mon Mothma. I was so angry, I just lost control."

Anakin nodded, a slight frown creasing his brow. "The Dark Side," he said solemnly. "That is what caused you to do those things, Leia."

Leia looked at her father, the fear evident in her eyes. "I don't want..." she stopped, not quite sure how to phrase her words. "I don't want to end up the way you did," she said at last, bracing herself for the flash of hurt feelings she expected to feel from him. To her surprise, all she felt was his empathy and his love.

"I know you don't," Anakin replied. "And you won't, Leia. I won't let what befell me happen to you. Our situations are completely different, remember; I had no one to talk to but the very one who was manipulating me. I couldn't talk to Obi-Wan, to your mother, to anyone in the Jedi order; I was alone in that... that hell that Palpatine created for me. You are not alone, Leia. You have your brother, your mother, Han..."

"You," she added. "You are the one who I will need the most, Father. You are the only one who understands what this feels like. As much as I know Han, Luke and Mother love me, they can't help me the way you can."

Anakin smiled, his heart warmed by his daughter's words. *If falling into Darkness has given me the wisdom to save her, then it was worth every minute of pain, every scar, and every lonely, empty year.* "Yes, Leia, I can help you. I mean to take you as my padawan learner, to teach you how to use your powers and to resist the lure of the Dark Side. You will be a powerful Jedi, Leia."

Leia believed her father, but it seemed like an unreachable dream to her. *Me? A Jedi??* It didn't seem possible. Luke was a Jedi, well, almost; her father was a Jedi, the greatest of all the Jedi. *But me?*

"I hope I am able to live up to your expectations, Father," she said at last.

Anakin reached over and took her hand. "Leia, you have already surpassed my expectations," he told her. "I am immensely proud of the young woman you have become. I am honored to call you my child."

Leia smiled, her father's words bringing tears to her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly. 'I can't help but feel guilty about what happened back there, though,' she admitted. "If you hadn't come when you did, I might have killed Mon Mothma."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, you may very well have," he concurred. "But you did not, and that is what you need to remember. Besides, if I know her, she isn't finished yet. I fully expect we shall hear from her again in the not too distant future."

"You think so?" Leia responded. "But the Alliance has her locked up now. Surely they won't let her escape!"

Anakin shrugged, turning his eyes to the view screen ahead of them. "People like Mon Mothma find a way to get what they want," he said thoughtfully. 'And do not hesitate to use whatever means necessary to get it. She has lost her sense of reason, and is vengeful. That is a dangerous combination.' He turned and looked at his daughter. "She'll be back, Leia," he stated. "Mark my words."

Leia frowned. *Whatever means necessary?? Han and Chewie were on the command ship...* “What can she do, though, really?” Leia asked. “The Alliance has seen what she has become; they won’t allow her to manipulate them any more.”

“No, perhaps not,” Anakin replied. “I’m more concerned of what she could do to expose your mother and I.”

“You mean you think she would actually go to the Empire and tell them who you are?” Leia asked incredulously. “You think they would listen to a word she says?”

Anakin sighed. “There are those among the Imperial elite who resent me and the policies I have brought about since becoming emperor. They would be only too happy to see me removed from power.”

“Then we have to ensure that she isn’t able to escape,” Leia replied. “She cannot be allowed to endanger you and mother that way.”

“No, she cannot,” Anakin agreed. “Because all our efforts would be in vain if our true identities were revealed.”

I won’t allow that to happen, Father, Leia vowed silently. No matter what it takes, she will never hurt any of us again.

Anakin watched her carefully, hearing her silent vow, and making one of his own. *This will not destroy my daughter; I will not let the Dark Side win again. Never.*

“Padmé, wake up angel.”

Padmé opened her eyes and looked up at Anakin who was sitting on the edge of the cot. He smiled at her. “We’ve just dropped out of hyperspace,” he told her.

She nodded. “How long have I been asleep?” she asked.

“About 4 hours or so,” Anakin said, gently stroking her face. “You needed the rest, obviously.”

Padmé sat up. “Did you sleep?”

Anakin shook his head. “No,” he replied. “Though I did have a rather interesting chat with our daughter.”

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. “Oh? What about?”

“I told her that I wanted to take her as my padawan learner,” he replied. “She seemed quite pleased to hear it.”

“Good,” Padmé responded. ‘I’m worried about her, Ani,’ she added. “The way she lashed out back there really scared me.”

Anakin frowned as he nodded. “Yes, me too,” he told her. “But don’t worry, Padmé; I’m not going to let her fall into darkness. She has all of us supporting her, and my own experience to guide her. She will be fine.”

“I hope so, Ani,” Padmé replied.

Anakin smiled, not telling her about the dark promise he had heard Leia make to herself. “Come on,” he said, taking her hand. “Time to go home.”

8

Chapter 78

CHAPTER 78

"It's good to be home," Padmé said as they walked into the great hall.

Anakin put an arm around her shoulders, looking around the familiar, comforting sights of home. "It is," he said. 'I wish I didn't have to leave again,' he sighed. "Maybe I can just send Piett..."

Padmé looked up at him. "Ani, we talked about this already," she reminded him. "You know that you are the only one who can affect the changes we need to ensure our plan works. I don't like the idea of being apart any more than you do; but we really don't have a choice."

"Perhaps not," he replied. "But I don't intend to stay away for weeks on end this time. I won't let you go through this pregnancy alone, Padmé."

"But I'm not alone," she protested. "Leia is here, and she's been wonderful company. And now that Threepio is back, he's not going to let any harm come to me," she added with a smile.

Anakin lifted an eyebrow at her comment. "Somehow that doesn't make me feel better," he muttered. "Nevertheless, I plan to return here on a regular basis between missions."

"That's an awful lot of traveling," Padmé commented.

Anakin put up his hand to stop her from continuing. "Yes, it is," he agreed. "But I've made my mind up, Padmé. Don't try to dissuade me."

"I know better than that," she teased, taking his hand with a smile.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'm starved," Luke announced.

"You're always starved," Leia teased, smiling at her brother.

Luke laughed. "Come to think of it, you're right!" he admitted.

"You come by it honestly, son," Anakin said with a smile. "Let's see if dinner is ready. I'm starving too."

After enjoying a large and enjoyable meal, the family adjourned to the parlor. They had barely sat down when a familiar voice was heard in the doorway.

"Master Luke! Mistress Leia! I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you both again!!!"

All eyes turned to the doorway where a familiar golden protocol droid stood, with R2D2 in tow.

"Threepio??" Anakin asked, looking in wonder at the droid. "Is that really you?"

Threepio looked at Anakin, but, having had his memory banks erased more than once over the past 22 years, did not recognize him except that he resembled Luke very much.

"I am C3P0," he began, reciting the litany he had ingrained in his programming. "Human cyborg relations. May I ask who you are, sir?"

Anakin was more than a little disappointed that his childhood friend did not know him. "Anakin Skywalker," he replied. "I made you."

If Threepio had eyebrows, they would have shot clear off the top of his golden metallic head at this revelation.

"*You* are the Maker??" Threepio exclaimed.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I made you when I was a boy. I'm sure your memory banks have been erased, or else you'd remember me, as well as Padmé," he said, turning to his wife.

"I truly wish I could remember you, sir," Threepio replied mournfully. "But... "he was interrupted by a series of whistles and chirps from his short companion." He didn't ask if *you* remembered him, R2," Threepio chided. "He was asking me! Now mind your own business, you overweight glob..."

"R2 remembers me?" Anakin said, turning to the astromech droid.

"How would he know you, Father?" Luke asked.

Anakin squatted down in front of the little droid. "He and I were on many missions together," he said with a smile. "We had many adventures, didn't we old friend?"

R2 responded with an excited affirmative, which made Anakin laugh.

"That's amazing," Leia said, watching the reunion with wonder. "I had no idea there was a connection between you and the droids."

Anakin stood up and looked at his daughter. "Well actually R2 was the property of your mother before we even met," he said, turning to Padmé. "When she was queen. We sort of did a swap, since I needed an astromech for my fighter, and she needed a protocol droid to... well, to..."

"Drive her crazy?" Luke offered with a grin. Everyone except Threepio laughed, including R2.

"Threepio was a good companion when your father was away at war," Padmé said, out of consideration for the droid's nonexistent feelings. "They were our witnesses at our wedding, weren't they Ani?"

"That's right," Anakin recalled with a smile. "I wonder..." he said, thinking for a moment. He squatted down to face R2 again. "R2, do you still have the footage from that day? The lakeside retreat on Naboo?"

R2 responded with a series of chirps and beeps. Anakin looked up at Threepio for a translation.

"He says he will check his redundant files," Threepio replied.

"Redundant, indeed," Padmé muttered.

R2 chirped excitedly and immediately projected a holographic image. Anakin sat down beside his wife, taking her hand as he did so, as they watched in silent amazement the simple wedding ceremony they had celebrated so long ago.

As for Luke and Leia, they watched as well, their eyes drinking every detail. *They're so young!* Leia reflected looking at her parents as they were almost 25 years ago.

"I can't believe how young I was," Anakin remarked, looking at Padmé with a smile. "I wasn't much more than a boy!"

Padmé smiled. "I don't remember you as a boy, Ani," she said softly, squeezing his hand.

Anakin smiled at her, remembering as vividly as she did the events of that memorable day and the night that followed.

"That was incredible," Luke announced as the images faded out. "What a wonderful memento of your wedding day. I don't imagine you have too many holographs of those days since you needed to keep your marriage a secret."

"You're right," Padmé replied. "So having this is truly special," she added, looking up at Anakin.

"Well I'm beat," Anakin said, anxious all of a sudden to be alone with his wife. "It's been a long few days and I think we could all use a good night's sleep."

"Yes, I agree," Padmé said, standing up. "Luke, Leia are you heading up?"

"I'm going to see if I can get through to Han first," Leia said. "But then I'm going to bed too."

"I'm done," Luke said, standing up with a yawn. "That huge dinner did me in."

Anakin smiled, his heart warmed simply by being with his family this way. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined an evening like this, enjoying a meal and a pleasant evening with his wife and children. *I will never take this for granted*, he vowed. *Never stop showing them how much I appreciate them all. They are the world to me; they are the greatest part of me.*

"Are you coming, Ani?" Padmé asked, holding her hand out to him. He looked up at her and nodded.

"Yes, I'm coming," he said, standing and taking her hand. 'Goodnight Leia,' he said, kissing his daughter on the cheek. "Give my best to Han."

"I will," Leia replied. "Sleep well everyone."

"You don't seem to understand the gravity of the situation," General Reikan said, leaning forward in his chair for emphasis. "You tried to kill Han Solo, and you abducted the Empress of the Galactic Empire! Don't you see how these actions would give us cause to question your sanity?"

Mon Mothma made no reply, but merely glared across the table at her former comrades. *Enemies, now they are my enemies*, she thought venomously.

“And what of Princess Leia’s attacks upon me?” she asked at last. “Or was that simply justifiable in your eyes?”

“No, of course it was not,” Dodonna put in. “But can you blame her for doing what she did? After what you did to her mother and to Solo?”

“I see,” Mon Mothma replied icily. “So she is permitted to retaliate, but I am not, is that it?”

“What were you retaliating for??” Han retorted hotly. “I didn’t hurt a hair on your head!”

“What harm had come to you at the hands of any of the Skywalkers??” Reikan put in. “Anakin Skywalker saved your life! Why can’t you see that he is a changed man? His plans for the galaxy are noble, and address the very issues we have been fighting for over the past two decades! Why can’t you admit that?”

Mon Mothma made no reply, but merely stared ahead of her blankly, her mind working frantically.

“I think I understand,” Reikan said at last. “This is a matter of pride, isn’t it?” he said. “You wanted to be the one to save the galaxy, and you can’t stand the fact that someone else is doing it, someone who has been our enemy for the past 22 years.”

“That’s not true!” Mon Mothma retorted hotly, her cheeks turning red with anger.

But the men were not convinced; her reaction was too vehement, too angry.

“No?” Han challenged her. “What else could it be, then? All you’ve wanted all these years is for democracy to return to the galaxy, and now the wheels are in motion; Anakin and Padmé *will* return democracy to the galaxy! Isn’t that what counts??”

She made no reply, for she had stopped listening to them completely.

Reikan, Han and Dodonna looked at one another, all of them thinking the same thing: *this woman is mad.*

“Perhaps it is time to adjourn this meeting for now,” Reikan suggested. “Obviously we are not getting anywhere with this discussion.” He motioned for the guards at the door to take her out of the room.

“How much longer am I going to be treated like a prisoner?” Mon Mothma asked at last as the guards come forward to escort her back to her cell.

“That depends on you,” Reikan told her, looking up at her as she stood up. “When you start acting rationally, then maybe we can talk about it. Until then, you are a security risk, and we cannot allow you to do anything that will jeopardize the safety of anyone on this ship or anyone in the Skywalker family.”

Mon Mothma nodded. “I see,” she replied quietly. She said no more, and allowed the guards to escort her from the room, her mind working furtively to find a solution to the situation she was mired in.

As the door closed behind her, Han turned to Dodonna and Reikan.

“She is crazy,” he stated. ‘There’s no doubt of it. We can’t let her free, no way!’ Dodonna nodded thoughtfully. “I agree,” he said, his voice somewhat sad in its tone. “What happened to her? She was such a great leader, how could this have happened?”

“It *has* happened,” Reikan pointed out. “And that’s all that matters right now. Han is right; we can’t let her free. Somehow we have to contain her. In her present state of mind she’s likely to do anything.”

Han nodded. “Yeah, she could go to Empire and blow Anakin right out of the water,” he said. “If she does that...”

“Then we’ll have another civil war on our hands,” finished Reikan. “We can’t allow that to happen, Solo; even if it means confining her to a sanitarium.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Dodonna said. “We still owe her a great debt for all she has done to put the Alliance together, after all; let’s not forget that, gentlemen.”

“Don’t let your affection for her blind you to what she has become, Jan,” Reikan warned his comrade. “She is not above taking advantage of that affection.”

Dodonna nodded sadly. “I know,” he admitted. “I won’t do anything foolish, don’t worry. I know how dangerous she is.”

Han and Reikan exchanged a look. *Let’s hope so*, Han thought grimly.

Chapter 79

CHAPTER 79

Anakin woke up in the middle of the night, a strong stirring in the Force interrupting his sleep. Padmé still lay nestled in his arms where she had fallen asleep hours earlier. He kissed the top of her head and moved away from her, careful not to wake her. He picked up his sleep pants from the floor where they had been tossed earlier and slipped them on. After a moment's consideration, he reached out in the dark with his hand and summoned his lightsaber, which flew to his hand at once. Without a sound, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

From the great hall below, he heard a familiar sound. Someone was wielding a lightsaber. Anakin knew who it was before he even started down the stairs, for his daughter's Force signature was distinctive, edged with darkness as his own had once been. Relieved, and now curious, he descended the stairs to join her.

"Kind of late to be practicing your saber technique, isn't it?" Anakin asked as he reached the hall. Leia turned to see him, holding her saber above her as he had instructed her.

"I couldn't sleep," she said, lowering her weapon. "I thought if I worked out a bit it would help."

Anakin nodded. "It usually does," he replied. "Would you like a partner?" he offered with a smile.

Leia's eyes widened. "You mean... *you*?" she asked.

"No one else around," Anakin said with a smile.

"I... I don't know, Father," she said, unwilling to admit that the thought of sparring with him intimidated her tremendously.

"Come on," he said, activating his own weapon. "I won't hurt you, I promise," he said, knowing that her pride would be too great at this point to turn him down.

She laughed. "Okay, but remember, I'm a novice," she said, assuming the stance he had shown her.

Anakin nodded. "I won't forget," he said, smiling at her. He assumed a defensive stance, and motioned with his hand for her to strike first.

Leia swallowed hard, tightened her grip upon her weapon, and moved forward, watching her father's movement closely. He moved his feet as she approached him, his eyes never leaving her.

"Hold it higher," he instructed her. "I'm much taller than you are, remember."

"No kidding," Leia muttered, raising her weapon as high as she could.

Anakin grinned. “Master Yoda always says that size doesn’t matter,” he told her. “And he’s right; he’s one of the greatest saber masters I’ve ever known.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” she said, lunging forward and bringing her blade to his. Sparks flew between the two blue blades as the energy channels clashed against one another. Anakin easily pushed Leia’s blade away, backing away from her. She came at him again, striking harder this time, amazed by her father’s strength and agility as he parried her blow easily.

“That was good,” he encouraged her. ‘Now try something different,’ he said. “Try to surprise me.”

Leia lifted her eyebrows. “You can read my mind, Father,” she reminded him. “How do you suppose I do that?”

“Clear your mind,” he told her. “Allow the Force to guide your movements, not your mind.”

Leia nodded, taking a moment to concentrate. The Force swirled around her, seemingly out of reach. Frustrated, she closed her eyes, willing it to come to her. Anakin sensed her frustration and walked over to her.

“Relax,” he told her, standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. “Let it flow, Leia. It’s right there, your aura is so strong with it.”

Leia nodded, taking a deep breath and allowing herself to relax. She wanted so badly to please her father, to impress him with her abilities; but she knew that he was right. *Relax*, she told herself. *Don’t make this so hard...*

“I can feel it!” She exclaimed at last. Anakin smiled, proud of her.

“Now use it,” Anakin said, stepping away from her again. “Find me.”

“Find you?” she asked, puzzled.

“Yes,” he said. “Keep your eyes closed and use the Force to find me.”

Leia felt a little silly standing there with her eyes closed, and was reminded briefly of a game she played as a child which involved a blindfold. *But this is no game*, she reminded herself, focusing once again. She reached out into the energy that surrounded them, seeking out his unmistakable Force presence. She found him, drawn to his brilliant aura easily. She turned to him, and opened her eyes. She grinned when she saw her father standing before her, a smile on his face.

“Very good,” Anakin said. “You see? You are a natural, Leia.”

She nodded. “I never imagined I could do that,” she said in awe.

“There was never any doubt in my mind,” he told her. He looked over her shoulder when he saw R2 D2 enter the room. “R2? What is it?”

R2 responded in a series of beeps and whistles that neither of them understood completely.

“Is it Han?” Leia asked.

“That’s it,” Anakin said, recognizing the droid’s affirmative response.

"I couldn't get through to him earlier," she said as they headed for the office. "But I left a message."

"Let's hope he has some good news," Anakin replied as they entered the office.

Leia sat down at the desk and activated the comm. screen. Han's image appeared. He smiled when he saw Leia.

"Hi there gorgeous," he said, and then noticed Anakin. *"Oh, hey there Anakin,"* he added.

"Solo," Anakin replied. "You have some news for us?"

"Yeah, we had a meeting with Mon Mothma earlier tonight," he began. *"The woman has lost her mind. She's vindictive and irrational. For some reason she has it in for you, Anakin, for your whole family."*

Anakin frowned. "Yes, that much is evident," he remarked. "What is the Alliance planning on doing with her?"

"Well, for now she's being held in custody under guard," Han replied. *"But long term I don't think anyone really knows what to do with her. It's a dicey situation, her being one of the founders of the Rebellion and all."*

"That doesn't make any difference now after what she did," Leia spoke up. "She should be tried for the crimes she committed like anyone else."

"Yeah, try to tell Dodonna that," Han replied. *"He seems to think she is just misguided. I'm worried she's gonna find a way to get him to help her."*

"That cannot happen," Anakin replied. "If she is free, then none of us are safe, and our plans for the galaxy are in jeopardy."

"Well Chewie is keeping close watch on her, but he can only do that for so many hours in a day, you know what I mean?"

"She's a loose cannon and needs to be dealt with definitively," Anakin responded.

"Can't you do something, Father?" Leia asked, looking up at him. "You're the emperor, after all."

"Yeah, you could arrest her for kidnapping Padmé," Han suggested.

Anakin sighed. "As much as I would love to do so, I can't. She would reveal our identities to the Empire, and then all our efforts to affect change would be in vain."

"I hadn't thought of that," Leia said in frustration. "Well there has to be something that can be done to contain her."

"Reikan mentioned the possibility of a sanitarium," Han told them. *"That may be our only hope at this point."*

Anakin nodded. "Yes, that would solve our problem," he replied. 'At least for now. Well I'll let you two talk alone,' he said, knowing how anxious his daughter was to speak with her beloved alone. "Good night Han, keep us informed."

"Will do," Han replied. *"Goodnight Anakin."*

Anakin bent down and kissed Leia on the cheek. “Goodnight love,” he said. “You did very well tonight, my young padawan,” he added with a smile.

Leia smiled back at him. “Thanks Father,” she said. “Good night.”

Anakin left the office and returned upstairs, climbing back into bed beside his wife. He simply lay in the dark for a few moments, his mind too occupied to sleep. The conversation he’d had with Han disturbed him, and he could not help but think that Mon Mothma was going to prove to be more dangerous than anyone had anticipated.

Rolling onto his side, he wrapped his arms around Padmé, taking comfort in her soothing presence, and, before too long, he managed to fall back to sleep.

Chapter 80

CHAPTER 80

“Good morning everyone,” Firmus Piett said as he entered the breakfast room.

“Good morning, Firmus,” Anakin said, “it’s good to see you old friend. Please join us.”

“Thank you, sir,” Piett replied, feeling a little overwhelmed at being invited to dine with the Imperial royal family. He took a seat beside Luke, glancing a little nervously about the table at the faces of those seated there. ‘I took the liberty of preparing an itinerary for you, my lord,’ he said, looking finally at Anakin. “I assume you will want to continue your tour of the Outer Rim now that the crisis has passed.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I do,” he replied. ‘But I have no wish to be gone for weeks on end this time,’ he added looking at Padmé. “I want to be home every two or three weeks to see my family.”

Piett lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “Oh?” he asked, looking at Padmé. “Is my lady alright?”

“I’m fine, Firmus,” Padmé replied with a smile.

“We are expecting another child,” Anakin explained, smiling at his wife. “And I am not about to miss this experience again.”

Piett smiled. “Well, congratulations to both of you,” he said. ‘Perhaps we ought to tighten security here at the palace for when you and Luke are away,’ he suggested. “Just to set everyone’s mind at ease.”

“That won’t be necessary...” Padmé began to say.

“I think that is a great idea,” Luke said.

“So do I,” Leia agreed. “With Mon Mothma showing signs of mental instability, we must ensure that she isn’t able to infiltrate this palace again.”

Anakin nodded. “Most definitely,” he agreed.

“Consider it done,” Piett replied. “I will see to it personally. And as for your itinerary, I will make the necessary changes. When are you planning on leaving again, my lord?”

“Within the next few days,” Anakin replied. “I don’t want the governors getting complacent.”

Luke grinned. “Somehow I doubt that will happen,” he said. “They’re still shaking in their boots after what you did to Jabba.”

“Yes, I heard about that,” Piett put in. “Well done, my lord. It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving candidate.”

"The Hutt have been exploiting the people of Tatooine for too long," Anakin spoke up. "I thought it was about time that came to an end."

"You know Ani I've seen the word *crusading* attributed to you in the holonews lately," Padmé said with a smile. "It seems the people of the Empire applaud what you are doing."

"Well, not all of them I'm sure," Anakin replied. "But they are the ones whose jobs are on the line."

"Not to mention their heads," Luke said.

Anakin smiled. "Well, not unless absolutely necessary. Jabba gave me no choice. He was unwilling to listen, unwilling to yield, and so he forced my hand, if you'll excuse the pun."

"I can't believe how you Force pushed him not once but twice!" Luke said in amazement.

"Now *that* I would have enjoyed witnessing," Piett said, standing up. "I will take my leave now, and get back to you as soon as possible with your alternate plans, my lord."

"Piett, will you stop calling me that?" Anakin said. "My name is Anakin. I am *not* your lord any longer."

Piett smiled. "Forgive me... Anakin; old habits die hard."

Anakin laughed. "Yes, they do indeed my friend. I'll walk you out," he said, standing up and leaving the room with Piett.

"Father *Force pushed* Jabba the Hutt??" Leia asked her brother in amazement.

Luke nodded as he took a sip of his juice. "Yep, it was incredible," he said. "He has such power, such incredible strength; I am truly in awe of him sometimes."

"I know what you mean," Leia said with a smile. She proceeded to tell Luke and their mother about her impromptu late night training session with Anakin.

"The three of you ought to have a sparring session," Padmé suggested. "The two of you against him."

"Mother, I can't believe you'd suggest we gang up on Father that way!" Leia laughed.

"Gang up on me in what way?" Anakin asked as he rejoined them at the table. He looked at his wife. "What ideas are you putting into their heads, Padmé?" he asked with a smile.

"Nothing too devious," she assured him. "I just thought it might be interesting to see you take on the two of them in a lightsaber duel. A mock one, of course. You do have practice sabers I assume."

"We do, but the real ones are more fun," Luke said with a grin.

Anakin sat back in his chair as he considered this. "You two against me," he said. "That hardly seems fair."

"Exactly what I thought," Leia said.

"I could easily beat you both using only one hand," Anakin added with a smile.

Luke and Leia looked at one another. "That sounds like a challenge to me," Leia said to her twin. "What do you think, Luke?"

"Yep," he said, folding his arms over his chest. "Exactly what I was thinking."

Anakin laughed. "And what do you think, Padmé?"

Padmé had not been listening to the conversation however, for her meal was not agreeing with her. "I think that I shouldn't have eaten those eggs," she said, standing up and rushing from the room.

"Poor Mother," Leia said with a frown. "How long was she this sick when she was pregnant with us?" she asked her father.

"I wasn't around during the early part of her pregnancy," Anakin reminded her. "But she told me it was about 5 or 6 weeks. A long time to feel that way I'm sure."

"So how about it, Father?" Luke asked. "What do you say to our challenge?"

Anakin looked at his son. "I say, name your time and your place," he replied with a smile.

Mon Mothma paced up and down in her small room, her mind churning. The meeting with her former comrades had not gone as well as she'd hoped; they most certainly thought she was mad, the looks in their eyes said as much. *Somehow I have to convince them otherwise, or I'll never get out of here...* she pondered. There was never a time when there wasn't a guard posted outside her room, and much of the time it was the indomitable Chewbacca. *I wouldn't stand a chance against him even if I was armed,* she realized grimly. *I need someone as an ally... someone whose allegiance I can depend upon, someone I can use to help me get the hell out of here...*

"Lunch is served, Commander."

Mothma's reverie was interrupted by the guard entering the room with a tray of rations. It wasn't terribly appetizing, but she realized that if she were to even attempt an escape, she needed her strength, and so she ate each and every meal that was brought before her, no matter how non-descript. She watched the guard as he set the tray down on the small table beside her cot, and retreated from the room, resetting the force field on the door as he did so. Mothma stood up and walked over to the meal. No cutlery other than a spoon. *Fat lot of good a spoon will do me...* she thought petulantly as she sat down to eat the food before her. *Someone will slip up;* she told herself as she ate. *Someone who still sees me for who I truly am and not the fiend the Skywalkers have made me out to be. It's only a matter of time, and I will have my freedom... and then, mighty Skywalkers, look out. You won't even see it coming.*

Chapter 81

CHAPTER 81

"How are you feeling? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay," Padmé replied, sitting down.

Anakin frowned, sitting on the floor in front of her. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Padmé smiled, stroking her fingers through his longish hair. "Yes, Ani," she told him. "This is completely normal, I promise you."

"It doesn't make me feel any better about seeing you this way," he grumbled.

"Well just think of the baby," Padmé replied. "Thinking of him always makes me feel better."

Anakin smiled. "Yes, I suppose that does help," he agreed. "We do need to think of a name for this little boy, you know."

Padmé laughed. "Ani, he's not due for another six months," she told him. "Plenty of time for that."

"You're right," he said with a smile. 'I guess I'm just looking forward to this so much, I'm a little over anxious.' He took her hand, his face becoming pensive. "I never will forgive myself for not being there for the birth of our twins," he told her, looking down at her hand in his.

Padmé nodded sadly, the memories of that day still painful in her mind. It was a day of beginnings, and a day of endings; the birth of her children, and yet the death of her beloved Ani... *or so I thought*, she reflected, looking down at him. "Let's not dwell on the past, Ani," she said, stroking his hair softly. "I'm thinking of the future, our future, the future of our family, including this little one," she told him, rubbing a hand over her abdomen.

Anakin smiled. "Yes, you're right," he said, putting his hand over hers, looking at her as yet unremarkable belly.

Padmé watched him thoughtfully for a moment. "You know, I have been thinking of a name, though," she told him.

He looked up at her. "Oh?" he asked. "I thought you said it was too early to think about names?"

"Well, it's a few months before he's born, but that doesn't mean we can't decide upon a name," she said. "Especially since we know the gender. You're certain it's a boy?"

Anakin nodded his head. "Not a doubt in my mind," he replied, looking back down at their hands upon her abdomen.

“Okay then,” Padmé replied. “I was thinking I’d like to name him after his father,” she said.

Anakin looked up at her again, his eyes wide. “You want to name him... after me??” he asked in astonishment.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, Ani,” she replied. “Is that so surprising?”

Anakin smiled, words escaping him momentarily. The gesture meant more to him than he could express; and he could feel the emotions threatening to overwhelm him. “Padmé, I don’t know what to say,” he admitted at last.

“Does that mean you like the idea?” she asked with a smile.

Anakin’s smile broadened. “Yes, very much,” he replied. “Thank you, angel. Thank you for this second chance. You have no idea what it means to me.”

Padmé could see that Anakin was very moved by her suggestion, and it warmed her heart. “I think I do,” she told him, leaning forward and kissing him softly on the cheek.

“So, Mon Mothma, tell me about yourself.”

Xanathe Kimer was a psychologist who was a part of the vast medical team of the Rebel Alliance. Generals Reikan and Dodonna had asked Kimer to speak to Mon Mothma to ascertain whether or not she was suffering from merely an emotional collapse, or a full blown psychosis. Kimer was well experienced with mental illness, and composed herself with professionalism and efficiency. If anyone could get to the root of Mothma’s irrational behavior, it was her.

Mon Mothma sat staring at the woman across the table from her. *They think I’m crazy, and they’ve sent this person here to find some proof of it. Well I’m not crazy, and I’m not about to let them manipulate me.*

“What would you like to know?” she asked sweetly.

“Whatever you think I’d like to know,” Kimer replied, smiling at her.

What the hell does that mean?? Mothma fumed. *She must think I’m really mad to talk to me that way... what have they been telling her?*

“Well, I’m from the planet Chandrila,” Mothma began. “I was a senator when the Republic fell. I was one of the founding members of the Rebel Alliance, along with some of my fellow senators.”

“Padmé Amidala was one of those senators, wasn’t she?” the woman probed, watching closely for Mothma’s reaction.

Mon Mothma controlled her emotions well at the mention of Padmé’s name, despite her inward anger at the sound of it. “Yes, she was as a matter of fact.”

Kimer watched her closely, taking note of the slight tension in her body language as she spoke of her. “You and Senator Amidala were friends in those days, weren’t you?”

Mon Mothma shrugged, endeavoring to appear indifferent. “I wouldn’t say friends,” she replied. “Colleagues at best.”

“But you knew her socially,” Kimer persisted. “Visited her home on more than one occasion.”

“Yes, but purely for official reasons,” Mothma replied, starting to get annoyed with the woman’s persistence.

“Did you like her?”

“What difference does that make?” Mothma retorted hotly, and then regretted her words. She took a deep breath to calm herself. “We were colleagues, we agreed on many issues, and collaborated on more than one occasion. She was a fine politician.”

“And personally? What did you think of her personal life?”

Mon Mothma frowned. “I don’t know what you mean,” she replied evasively.

Kimer regarded Mothma for a moment, trying to think of a way to phrase her questions in a way that would give her the answers she needed. “Were you ever... envious of her?” she asked at last.

Mon Mothma frowned. “Envious?? Of what?” she asked irately.

“I don’t know, any number of reasons,” she replied. “She was well respected, well loved by her people; a queen at the age of 14 and held in high esteem by the Jedi...”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Mothma muttered.

“What do you mean by that?”

Mothma looked at the woman. Was she trying to trap her? Or was she truly unaware of the relationship that had existed between Padmé and the Jedi knight Skywalker?

“Let’s just say that it was more than *high esteem* that she was held in by one particular Jedi Knight,” Mothma replied.

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“I think you can figure it out for yourself,” Mothma replied.

“And that bothers you? Why?”

“Did I say it bothered me?”

“No, you didn’t, but I get the impression that you disapprove.”

Mothma folded her arms and looked away.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Kimer persisted. “You don’t approve of the relationship between Padmé Amidala and Anakin Skywalker?”

“It’s not my place to approve or disapprove,” Mothma replied smoothly.

“No, but you obviously have an opinion on the subject,” Kimer remarked.

Mothma looked back at her, trying with all her might to hold her tongue. “Well, let’s just say that since finding out about their... relationship, I understand things a lot better. The past is starting to make more sense to me.”

“What do you mean?”

Mon Mothma was on a rampage now, and wasn't about to hold back. This had been eating away at her since she first learned of the connection between Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa, since she found out that Padmé Amidala had secretly been involved with Anakin Skywalker; the same Anakin Skywalker who annihilated the Jedi.

“I mean that she was responsible for destroying the best chance the Republic had of destroying the evil in the galaxy,” Mothma replied at last. “I realize that now. I always wondered what had happened to Anakin Skywalker, and now I know! *She* happened to him; she seduced him and carried on with him for years while he was trying to fulfill his duties as a Jedi. And he let her do it; he abandoned his duties, his vows to the Jedi and allowed her to compromise his position in the Jedi Order! And now I know he became Darth Vader, probably because of her, probably because of being torn between the two of them, and we all know what Darth Vader did to the galaxy!”

The woman sat listening to Mothma, growing more alarmed by the minute. *This is the crux of it, she realized. This is what is driving her hatred... she blames Padmé Amidala and Anakin Skywalker for the fall of the Republic...*

“General Reikan tells me that Darth Vader has been redeemed and that he has great plans for the emancipation of the....”

“Don't try to convince me of the *greatness* of Darth Vader,” Mothma spat. ‘I know better than anyone what a monster he is! He and his storm troopers laid waste to my home planet during the Jedi purges, he destroyed what had been my ancestral home for generations,’ she ranted. “And yet everyone seems to forget all the atrocities he committed! Well I haven't, and I never shall, nor will I ever trust anyone who bears his name or his children!”

Kimer sat there in silence for a moment, trying to maintain her calm exterior in the face of Mon Mothma's obvious psychosis.

“I am sorry to hear of your loss,” she said at last, standing up to take her leave. “I think perhaps we should conclude our chat for today. I can see that I have upset you.”

Mon Mothma watched her as she stood up and prepared to leave, wondering what report she was going to file with those traitors she had once called her friends. *Surely this woman can see how justified I am in my anger; in my need for revenge... surely anyone can see that!*

“I will talk to you again soon,” Kimer said, turning to Mon Mothma once again. “I wish you a good night.”

Mothma made no reply, but merely watched as the woman left, no doubt proceeding immediately to Reikan and the others as soon as she had cleared the detention block.

“Supper,” the guard announced as he entered the room, holding a tray in his hand.

Mothma looked at him, and then at the tray, trying to summon her appetite. But the conversation with the councilor had left her agitated; eating was the last thing she felt like doing. *How am I going to get out of here?* She thought anxiously as the guard reactivated the force field. *If I don't soon, they will lock me up forever...and I won't allow that to happen, not so long as Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala are ruling the galaxy.*

Chapter 82

CHAPTER 82

“Redeemed, he is. Anakin Skywalker he has become again.”

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui Gon Jinn, in their ghostly, ethereal form now, looked at one another as Yoda pronounced this incredible declaration.

“Master Yoda, are you sure about this?” Obi-Wan asked. “It hasn’t been that long since he and I fought on board the Death Star. I sensed nothing but darkness from him, nothing but evil.”

“No doubt there is,” Yoda insisted.

“I agree with Yoda,” Qui-Gon told his former padawan. “I have watched him for a long time, and this change in him is genuine, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan wasn’t so convinced. “And yet he killed Jabba the Hutt in cold blood,” he pointed out. “Are those the actions of a redeemed man? Of a Jedi Knight?”

Yoda sighed tiredly. “Understand him, you do not, Obi-Wan,” he said. “Talk to him, you should. Then see for yourself you shall.”

Obi-Wan didn’t like the idea of talking to Anakin again, not after their last meeting, not after Mustafar. But if both Yoda and Qui-Gon believed that he had been redeemed, then perhaps it was possible.

“Anakin means to rebuild the Jedi Order,” Qui-Gon told Kenobi. “And he will need our help to do it, Obi-Wan. You and he must put the past behind you if we are to succeed.”

“Yes, to Qui-Gon you listen,” Yoda instructed Kenobi. “Like brothers you and Anakin were. Forgive one another you must.”

Obi-Wan looked out the vast window of the cabin that Yoda had taken up temporary residence in on board the Rebel command ship. He had suffered nightmares about Mustafar for the past twenty years, even though Jedi were not supposed to have nightmares. The cries of Anakin’s pain still rang in his ears; the sight of his body engulfed in flames haunted him to that very day. But it was more than Anakin’s physical ruin that Kenobi suffered over; the loss of his best friend’s soul ate at his own soul, and had done so for two decades. *How did I not see it coming? How could I have allowed him to slip away like that without noticing??* If it were possible that Anakin was his true self again, then he owed it to his former padawan to try to make amends for the past.

“You’re right, of course,” Obi-Wan said at last, turning back to the two other Jedi. “I will speak with Anakin. I only hope you are right about him.”

“Doubt us still you do,” Yoda observed wryly.

Obi-Wan smiled. “No, Master, it’s not that. I suppose it’s just that... it’s too good to be true.”

Qui-Gon nodded. “I can see how you would feel that way, Obi-Wan,” he told him. “But he is the Chosen One, remember; perhaps his decent into the darkness was part of the prophecy, a part that we did not anticipate.”

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan conceded. “I will speak to him.”

Yoda nodded. “Glad I am to hear it,” he said.

“So tell us about your search for younglings,” Qui-Gon said, addressing Yoda. “I understand you’ve been quite busy these past few weeks, Master.”

“Indeed I have,” Yoda replied. “Hope for the Order, there is.”

“Luke, I think we made a mistake. This is a bad idea.”

“Come on, Leia, it will be fun,” Luke countered as he and his twin practiced with their lightsabers in the palace’s gymnasium.

“Fun?” Leia retorted. “What’s so fun about getting our butts kicked?”

Luke laughed. “What makes you think he’ll kick our butts? It’s two against one, remember? I think we’ll be a good match for him.”

Leia shook her head. “Ever the optimist,” she said. “Well don’t say I didn’t warn you when we are humiliated.”

Luke grinned. “Jedi don’t have pride, Leia,” he reminded her. “If we lose, we will still benefit from the experience. Think of all he can teach us, and what better way then in an actual duel.”

“Not an actual duel,” Leia pointed out. “I won’t fight with a real saber, not against you and him. I’m afraid I’d hurt one of you, or myself.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Leia,” Luke told her. “You are a natural, as Father has said many times. You just have to let go and let the Force do all the work.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” she replied. “I don’t know how to do it.”

“That’s not true,” Luke said. “How else did you open the door to get to Mon Mothma?”

Leia frowned. “That was fluke,” she said. “And besides, Father said it was the Dark Side that enabled me to do those things. How am I to know the good side from the bad?”

Luke smiled, remembering how he had asked Yoda that very same question.

“Master Yoda told me that I would know, I would just... know. But you have to be calm, at peace. Anger will summon the Dark Side, Leia; anger, fear, aggression are all dark emotions. You must avoid them, for the Dark Side is a part of them. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” she said, frowning slightly. This was all so new to her, so strange and foreign still; yet both Luke and their father believed that she had the abilities that they both possessed. ‘I will do my best,’ she said at last, assuming her stance once again to ready herself for Luke’s attack. “Come on, let’s try that again.”

“There’s not a doubt in my mind, she is suffering from deep psychosis,” Xanathe Kimer informed Generals Reikan, Dodonna, Admiral Ackbar and Han Solo. “She is irrational, delusional, and full of anger. In my professional opinion, I would say that she ought to be considered very dangerous in her present state.”

“So what do we do with her?” Han asked, cutting to the chase. “She’s already proven how dangerous she can be. We can’t give her another chance to do so.”

“Agreed,” Reikan replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “What is your suggestion, Doctor?”

“Well, medication might help,” Kimer began. “But she may resist taking it if she suspects that you are attempting to alter her behavior. Besides, it wouldn’t change her condition, only make it manageable.”

“What exactly is her condition?” Ackbar asked. “Are we talking about mental illness here?”

“Absolutely,” Kimer replied. “There are several possibilities, but all of them mean the same thing; she can’t be trusted, not in her present state.”

“So you think we need to lock her up? Keep an eye on her?” Solo asked.

“Most definitely keep her confined,” Kimer replied. “In her present state she is capable of anything, including homicide.”

“I don’t believe that,” Dodonna spoke up. ‘I have known her for more than twenty years, and she has never shown any sign of violent tendencies. She would *not* kill! I know it!’

“You forget how she took a shot at me, General,” Han spoke up. “That blaster wasn’t set on stun, you know!”

“She shot you in the shoulder, Solo,” Dodonna replied tersely. “If she’d intended to kill you, she’d have done so; she’s not exactly unfamiliar with weapons.”

“Jan, I have to tell you that you’re line of thinking is alarming me,” Reikan said to his friend. “I’ve known her almost as long as you have, but that doesn’t mean that we know her now. You heard what Doctor Kimer just said; she’s suffering from mental illness. We can’t assume that just because we knew the person she was, we can trust the person she has become.”

“I just hate the thought of turning our back on the founder of this Alliance,” Dodonna said, shaking his head ruefully. “She was the Supreme Commander of the Alliance! How can we just lock her away somewhere and pretend she doesn’t exist anymore?”

“How? I’ll tell you how,” Han spoke up, getting angry at Dodonna’s bleeding heart point of view. “She’s a dangerous, unpredictable woman, General. She has already abducted a pregnant woman, and nearly caused her to miscarry; she took a shot at me, and has nothing but contempt and hatred for every member of the Skywalker family, including Anakin, who saved her life. I know how important she has been to this Alliance; but that doesn’t erase the fact that she is a loose cannon. If we ever want there to be an end to the fighting in the galaxy, we need to back up Anakin and his family, you know that as well as the rest of us. If Mothma has her way, Anakin and Padmé’s plans will be sabotaged simply because of her own personal vendetta against them. If that isn’t insanity, I don’t know what is.”

Dodonna sighed, realizing that Solo was right. "Let me talk to her," he said at last. "Maybe I can get through to her; we've been friends a long time."

Han, Reikan and the others exchanged a look.

"I suppose that would be acceptable," Ackbar said at last. "Just so long as you keep your guard up, Jan. Don't think that you can count on your friendship to protect you from her. She's a dangerous, desperate woman. Keep that in mind."

"You don't need to tell me that," Dodonna replied, getting annoyed at Ackbar's perceived condescension. "I know her better than anyone."

Kimer shook her head. "No you don't, General; no one knows her anymore. That is the problem."

"I understand," Dodonna replied. "And I promise I'll be careful. I'll even carry a weapon if that makes you feel any better."

"It does," Reikan replied. "I'm sorry it has to be this way, Jan; but surely you can understand our position."

Dodonna nodded. "I do. Just let me have this one chance, one last opportunity to get through to the woman we all know is deep inside her before we lock her away."

"Very well," Ackbar replied. "I suppose we can permit that much."

Han did not voice his opinion, but inside he felt warning signs. *I don't know why, but I have a bad feeling about this... a really bad feeling.*

Chapter 83

CHAPTER 83

"Now remember, this was your idea, Padmé," Anakin said as he limbered up in the gymnasium. "I'm not sure you're going to enjoy this."

Padmé lifted one eyebrow. "And why not?" she asked. "Are you so certain that it will be entirely one sided?"

Anakin grinned. "Of course," he replied. "They are both padawans, Padmé, they don't have even a fraction of the skill I have."

Padmé shook her head. "Such arrogance," she said. "We'll see. Maybe you'll be in for a rude awakening, Ani. Maybe they'll end up embarrassing you."

"Perhaps," Anakin said, twirling the practice saber around in his hand effortlessly. "But somehow I doubt it."

"I just hope you don't eat your words, Anakin," Padmé said with a smile. "You know how grumpy you get when you're proven wrong. Besides, what would Obi-Wan say about such cockiness?"

Anakin sighed, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I miss him, Padmé," he told her softly. 'I've been thinking about him a lot lately. I wish I had the chance to apologize to him for everything,' he said, stopping and looking down at the saber in his hand. "I...I killed him, Padmé," he said, frowning at the memory, his eyes cast downward. "I killed my master, the closest thing I ever had to a father." He looked back up at her. "How can I live with myself knowing that now?"

Padmé shook her head. "I don't know, Ani," she said. "But you weren't yourself when that happened, you were Darth Vader."

"Does that excuse what I did?" Anakin replied. "I cannot justify a lifetime of crimes simply because I was known by another name."

"No, Ani, it was not just a matter of a different name; you were a different person, a person consumed by anger, by darkness; a person full of pain. Obi-Wan of all people would realize that."

Anakin smiled at his wife, grateful beyond measure that she had found it in her heart to forgive him for his unthinkable betrayal, for a life time he robbed her of with their children.

"Perhaps," Anakin replied at last, looking at the saber in his hand. "I suppose I shall never know one way or the other."

"Well let me ask you this," Padmé said. "Do you forgive him for what he did to you on Mustafar?"

Anakin looked at her, considering her question. That dark day on Mustafar was like a nightmare to him now, one that he'd sooner forget altogether. *Obi-Wan left me to die, mutilated me and let me burn beyond human recognition... can I forgive that?*

"I'm not sure," he replied truthfully. "That day changed my life irrevocably. I'm not sure I will ever be able to put it behind me."

Padmé sighed, disappointed to hear him say it. "I have," she said at last. "And if I can, then why can't you?"

Anakin frowned, unsure of how to respond. *Because you have a pure heart... because the darkness never touched your soul... because you're better than me...*

"I am trying," he replied at last.

"I know you are," she said, putting her hands on his chest.

"Okay let's get this over with," Leia announced as she entered the room.

Anakin and Padmé looked over at her with a smile.

"Such enthusiasm," Anakin remarked with a smile.

Leia couldn't help but laugh. "Well, I'm not exactly any match for you, Father," she said. "As I showed you the other night."

"But you've been practicing since then, Leia," Padmé pointed out. "Don't short change yourself."

"And you will have your brother fighting with you," Anakin added. "Luke is a little more experienced than you and will make a fine partner."

"Let's hope so," Luke remarked as he joined the rest of the family. "Don't tell me Leia is trying to back out of this," he said, winking at Anakin.

"I think she is," Anakin replied, eyeing Leia thoughtfully. "Already conceded the victory. That was the easiest duel I've ever won."

"Alright, alright," Leia said at last, putting her hands up to stop them both. "I'll never hear the end of it if I don't at least try."

"You've got that right," Luke teased, giving her a light tug on the braid she wore down her back.

Padmé laughed, loving the easy manner with which her children interacted with one another. It was hard to believe that they had spent a lifetime apart, for they were so connected now.

"Are we ready then?" she said, as the three combatants did some stretches to limber up.

"I've been ready for an hour," Anakin quipped.

"Anxious, aren't you?" Leia remarked, smirking at her father.

"You bet I am," Anakin replied, readying himself for attack. "Shall we?"

Padmé moved back to the bench that was situated along one wall of the gymnasium to watch. Although it had been she who had suggested this contest, she had very ambivalent feelings now. For one thing, how could she possibly be partial to either side? Her children versus her Ani? The fact that they were fighting with practice sabers made her feel somewhat better, but even practice sabers could cause injury if not used with caution. But perhaps more than anything, it was Leia that caused her the most concern. Padmé had seen changes in her daughter over the past several weeks, since Padmé herself had been abducted by the agents of Mon Mothma. There was an edge to Leia now that hadn't existed before, or if it had, had been too negligible to notice. Leia had always reminded Padmé of Anakin, their personalities were very much alike; but now she was beginning to see the same dark tendencies in Leia that she had once seen in Anakin, and it frightened her. There was no doubt in Padmé's mind that Anakin would win this contest; his skill and strength were unmatched. While Luke would no doubt see it as a learning experience, Padmé wasn't so sure Leia's reaction would be as positive. She was a proud young woman, a woman who had always done things well, and had always been in control of her situation. Suffering a humiliating defeat at the hands of her father, even just in a mock battle, would no doubt bruise that ego. Padmé could only hope that it wouldn't go further than that. *What if she tries so hard to win that she invokes the Dark Side to do it? Would she even recognize that darkness were it to tempt her? Does she have the strength to resist its lure?*

"Padmé? Everything okay?"

Padmé looked over to see Anakin and the twins looking at her expectantly.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Please, begin."

"Just wait," Anakin said as a thought suddenly occurred to him. He walked over to the side of the room where a number of practice weapons were displayed in a cabinet. He opened it and withdrew a second weapon, tested it briefly, and then returned to his children.

"Two lightsabers?" Leia asked, one hand on her hip. "You're going to fight with two?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Anakin told her. "Besides, there are two of you, so I need two sabers."

Leia exchanged a look with Luke, feeling even less sure of herself than before.

"Shall we begin?" Anakin suggested.

Luke and Leia took the attack stance as Anakin assumed one of defense. The twins moved away from one another in an attempt to surround their father. Anakin watched one, and then the other, keeping his sense tuned to them both to predict what they would do. And then it began.

Luke came in at Anakin first, using an overhead slash that Anakin easily blocked, while Leia engaged her father from closer at hand, forcing him to back peddle. Anakin was pleased at her determination, and decided not to test her too easily in the match, lest she lose confidence.

Padmé watched from the side with baited breath. She could tell that Anakin was holding back, for he seemed content merely to counter parry each move the twins attempted, and had

not yet gone on the offensive. *I guess he realizes that it will be all over at that point*, she mused.

As for Luke and Leia, they too sensed that their father was going too easy on them, and decided to press him harder. As though in silent communication with one another, Luke and Leia made identical feints at precisely the same moment, forcing Anakin to hold them both at bay. He simply smiled at them. "Is that the best you've got?" he teased.

The harder they pushed, the more he smiled. Luke, being the stronger of the two, managed to get his saber to within striking distance before Anakin finally summoned the Force to push them both off. The twins stumbled back, frustrated, but determined not to be put off. They came at Anakin with more aggression this time, only to have Anakin repel them again. This time, as they fought to maintain their equilibrium, he came at them. With speed and agility that astonished Luke and Leia, Anakin attacked, the muted hue of both blades flashing as he forced each of this two children to assume a defensive stance. Doing their best just to parry the blitzkrieg, the both back peddled, allowing their father the advantage of position. It didn't take long for Anakin to disarm Leia, and did so before Leia even knew what had happened.

"Luke, here," Anakin said, directing Leia's fallen weapon to his free hand. Luke caught the saber easily and brought it up to meet his father's second blade.

"I've never fought with two," Luke admitted.

"First time for everything," Anakin replied, pushing Luke away easily.

Leia moved away from the battle, winded and disappointed by the brevity of the contest. She leaned against the wall and watched her father and brother as they continued to fight, four sabers clashing and twirling.

"Come on, Luke!" she urged from the sideline. "Don't let him win so easily!"

Luke didn't acknowledge his twin's words, but Anakin sensed his son's determination rise another notch, as though he was now fighting for both of them.

"Had enough?" Anakin asked as he and Luke circled one another, both holding their lightsabers aloft.

Luke shook his head. "Not on your life," he replied with a grin.

Anakin grinned back, enjoying his son's enthusiasm.

Leia, meanwhile, had gone to sit with her mother. Padmé looked up at Leia who still stood with her eyes riveted on the battle.

"There are plenty of weapons over there," Padmé said.

Leia looked down at her mother. "What did you say?"

Padmé smiled, knowing how disappointed Leia was to be left out of the skirmish. "You heard me," Padmé said. "Go on, your father loves a challenge."

Leia smiled. "But, that would be cheating, wouldn't it?" she asked.

Padmé shrugged. "I don't know about that," she replied. "I'd call it being creative."

That was all Leia needed to hear. She sprinted over to the cabinet where Anakin had obtained his second weapon and withdrew a saber, igniting it and moving over to join her father and her brother.

"Welcome back," Anakin said without looking at her, but sensing her presence nonetheless.

"Didn't want to miss all the fun," Leia replied, moving in with her brother to attack Anakin.

I'm not as young as I used to be, Anakin reflected as he began to get tired. While he definitely had the advantages of skill, strength and experience, Luke and Leia had the advantage of youth. *If I don't end this soon I may end up being embarrassed*. Anakin reflected as he forced his children back, attempting to disarm them.

"Had enough?" Luke asked, smiling at his father.

Anakin laughed. "Not quite," he said.

"You're not as young as you used to be, you know," Leia put in.

Anakin shook his head. "No, but still young enough to put the two of you in your place," he said, summoning his strength and flipping over the two of them, forcing them to take the defense as he suddenly appeared behind them.

"I'll take that," he said, stripping Luke of the weapon in his left hand and sending it flying across the room. Luke saw it out of the corner of his eye, but forced himself to keep his focus on his father, whose attack had taken on another level of intensity. He glanced at his sister, whose face bore an expression of determination matched by his own. *I have a bad feeling about this*, he said to her through their mental connection. She glanced at him briefly, not acknowledging his admission, refusing to admit that she shared his feelings.

Anakin, however, had also heard the admission, and it urged him of even further. "Your skills are impressive," he told them both. "But not quite impressive enough," he added, goading them on.

Leia and Luke merely grew more determined under Anakin's taunts, but it was quickly becoming evident that their father was right. While they both showed enormous potential, neither of them was a match for him, even combined. Yet, they were determined not about to concede victory not yet. They worked furiously, pushing back together against their father, engaging him at close range. Anakin held each of them back, the blades of his weapons grinding against those of his children. He could sense their strength starting to falter, particularly Leia's, and pushed even more, summoning the Force to add more leverage. With one final push, he sent both of them back. They rushed him again, this time reaching an invisible wall of energy that sent them both flying back again. Exhausted, they tried on final time, only to have their father maneuver their weapons out of their hands.

"I've had enough," Leia said, her hands resting on her thighs, trying to catch her breath. "I concede."

"Yeah, me too," Luke said begrudgingly. "I know when I've been beat."

Anakin was secretly delighted that the battle had ended, for he too was tired. He nodded and straightened up, smiling at his children. "You did very well," he said. "I'm very proud of you both."

Luke and Leia were pleased by their father's praise, and returned his smile.

"I told you that you were a natural," Anakin told Leia, putting an arm around his shoulder. "Those were some pretty impressive moves."

"You think so?" Leia replied.

Anakin nodded. "Absolutely. And you," he said, turning to Luke next, putting his other arm around his son's shoulders. "Very impressive with two weapons. That's a very advanced skill, and you did a great job for your first time."

Luke smiled, immensely gratified to hear his father's words of praise.

"Well, that was certainly something to behold," Padmé said, standing up and walking over to them.

Anakin looked over to her and smiled. "They were amazing, weren't they?" he asked, the pride evident in his voice.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, they were," she said, looking at her children with a smile. "And so were you."

Anakin shrugged as he released his children. "Not bad for an old man I suppose."

"Old man??" Padmé replied. 'Oh please,' she said shaking her head. "You are anything but old."

Anakin laughed. "Well, I'm glad you think so," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Well I need a shower," Leia said. "That was incredibly hard work."

"But it was fun, wasn't it?" Luke asked.

Leia nodded with a smile. "Yeah, it was. Thanks, Father. Thanks for going easy on us."

Anakin raised his eyebrows. "What makes you think I did that?" he asked.

"The fact that it lasted more than 30 seconds," Leia replied with a smile.

Luke laughed. "I'm starving," he announced, to the surprise of none. "I'm going to find myself a snack. You coming up, Dad?"

Anakin shook his head. "I'll be up shortly," he said. "Just want to put these away."

"Need a hand?" Luke asked.

"No, you go on up," Anakin said. "I don't want to deprive a growing boy his snack," he added with a grin.

Luke laughed as he and Leia headed upstairs.

"Tell me the truth," Padmé said when the twins were out of earshot. "Did you go easy on them?"

Anakin looked down at her. "What do you think?" he asked.

Padmé smiled, and then got on her tiptoes to give him a kiss. "You're a good father," she said. "And I love you."

"Thank you angel," he said, touching her face lightly. "It means a lot to hear you say that."

"Well it's true," she said. "Are you coming up? Baby needs a snack too."

Anakin smiled. "I'll be there in a bit. You go on up."

Padmé nodded, and then turned and left Anakin alone. With a sigh he turned around, summoned the discarded weapons to his hand, and walked over to the wall to replace them, more tired than he wanted to admit to anyone, even himself.

Chapter 84

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Anakin closed the cabinet, having replaced the practice weapons.

“That was quite an impressive display.”

Anakin turned around to see the ethereal image of Obi-Wan Kenobi standing in the gymnasium. A jumble of emotions rippled through him, memories both recent and distant flashing through his mind at the sight of his former master.

“Thanks,” Anakin said at last, feeling awkward, not knowing what to say.

Obi-Wan shared Anakin’s uneasiness. He could sense the change in his old friend, but was uncertain how to talk to him, or even what to say. There was so much that needed to be said, however. *Where do I start?* he wondered.

“It’s good to see you,” Obi-Wan said at last.

Anakin nodded. “You too,” he returned, running a hand through his sweaty hair. “This is...this is kind of awkward, isn’t it?” he admitted at last, a small smile on his face.

Obi-Wan smiled in response. “It is,” he agreed. ‘I think we need to talk though, Anakin,’ he added. “We both have a lot to say.”

“I agree,” Anakin said. ‘Let me start by apologizing for what I did to you on the Death Star,’ he said, looking down at his boots, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. “There are no words really to express my regret over that; no excuse I can offer.”

“The Dark Side was working through you, Anakin,” Obi-Wan responded.

“That may be, but it doesn’t excuse what I did to you,” Anakin replied, looking back up at Obi-Wan. ‘Nor what I did twenty years ago,’ he added, looking away again. “Nothing can excuse that.”

“Anakin, you’re not the only one who has something to atone for,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘I feel partly responsible for what happened to you,’ he admitted, speaking the words aloud for the first time in more than two decades. “I was your master, Anakin; I should have seen what was happening before it was too late.”

Anakin looked back at him, shaking his head. “Don’t blame yourself for the choices I made, Obi-Wan,” he said. “I never was reasonable.”

“No, that’s certainly true,” Obi-Wan agreed wryly. “But Mustafar... that was another matter.”

Anakin frowned, the memory of that terrible day too dreadful to remember. “That day was the worst of my life,” he reflected quietly. “I would give anything to go back in time to change it.”

“So would I, Anakin,” Obi-Wan replied. “But neither one of us can do that. I just want you to know that I have regretted what happened there every day of my life.”

“So have I,” Anakin returned. “But I have vowed to dedicate the rest of my life to atoning for that day, to my wife, to my children, and to the rest of the galaxy.”

Obi-Wan nodded approvingly. “I know of your plans to destroy the Empire,” he said. “It seems you have the full approval of Master Yoda and Master Qui Gon.”

“And what about you?” Anakin asked pointedly. “Do I have yours as well?”

Obi-Wan ran a hand over his beard thoughtfully before he responded. “To be honest with you, Anakin, I had my doubts when Yoda first told me about your redemption,” he said. “I wasn’t certain that I could believe it, and felt that I needed to talk to you to decide for myself.”

“Decide what?” Anakin asked.

“If you were truly redeemed,” Obi-Wan replied. “Or if this was just an elaborate ruse to fool the Alliance into trusting you.”

Obi-Wan watched Anakin closely for his reaction, half expecting him to fly into an angry rage. But he did not. *Perhaps Yoda was right after all*, he reflected.

“I only want to heal the galaxy,” Anakin said at last. “To try to repair the damage that I helped inflict.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, I can see that now. I don’t believe anyone has ever returned from the Dark Side, Anakin; the fact that you have done so proves that you are the Chosen One. You have destroyed the Sith, not in the manner that we all expected, but you did it nonetheless.”

“Yes, I did,” Anakin acknowledged. “But I’m not sure it would have happened had it not been for the knowledge of my family. I lived all those years thinking they were dead; when I learned that my children were alive, it changed me forever. It gave me another reason to live, a reason not forged in Darkness. It has been the love and support of my family that has allowed me to get this far, to reject the Dark Side irrevocably.”

“It makes me wonder if the Jedi Council was wrong all those years,” Obi-Wan commented. “Perhaps emotional attachments are more valuable than they thought.”

“There is no doubt in my mind,” Anakin averred. “Were it not for the love of my wife and children, I would not be redeemed, not entirely.”

“Something to consider when we rebuild the Order,” Obi-Wan remarked with a smile. “Assuming that is part of your plans.”

Anakin smiled. “It most certainly is,” he replied. “Master Yoda has already begun to search for Force sensitive beings to start the process.”

“Yes, he told me,” Obi-Wan replied. “Your own two children will make fine Jedi,” he added. “Young Luke has already shown tremendous promise.”

"He has," Anakin agreed. 'Leia is just as gifted; I worry about her, though,' he said with a frown. "She reminds me so much of myself at her age."

"You mean she is cocky and hot-tempered?" Obi-Wan asked wryly.

Anakin laughed. "Well, that wasn't exactly what I meant," he replied. "Though her temper is rather reminiscent of my own. I worry that this will lead her to the Dark Side, Obi-Wan."

"With your guidance, that won't happen," Obi-wan averred. "You better than anyone know how to prevent that from happening. She will benefit from your experience."

"I hope so," Anakin replied. "I will do everything I can to keep her from the Darkness."

Obi-Wan smiled, folding his arms over his chest. "So, my young headstrong padawan has finally grown up," he said. "You have much to be proud of, Anakin. Not just your redemption, but your children as well. They will be instrumental in reforming the Order."

"Yes, they will," Anakin agreed. "I'm just grateful that them and Padmé are willing to allow me a second chance. Did you know that we are expecting another child?" he asked with a smile.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "No, I did not," he replied. 'Congratulations,' he added with a smile. "You seem to have your life in order, Anakin. After what happened the last time we met, I never would have imagined that you would have come so far."

"Neither would I," Anakin admitted with a smile. "But here I am, emperor of the Galactic Empire, laying the groundwork of its eventual disintegration."

"Rather fitting, don't you think?" Obi-Wan observed. "That you would be the instrument of its destruction?"

"Yes, I think so," Anakin replied. "I only hope that our plans are not sabotaged along the way."

Obi-Wan frowned. "By whom?"

Anakin proceeded to tell his former master of the troubles that they'd had with Mon Mothma, and his fears that she would do something to undermine the efforts he and Padmé had made to remake the galaxy.

"She has obviously lost her mind," Obi-Wan commented. "Madness is a dangerous thing; it can turn a rational, level-headed person into a dangerous enemy. I hope the Alliance has her well contained."

"Yes, so do I," Anakin replied. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you, Obi-Wan. I've been thinking of you a lot lately."

Obi-Wan smiled. "I've missed you as well, old friend. We have a lot of years to make up for, you and me."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, we do indeed. I will need your help if I am going to rebuild the Jedi Order."

"And you shall have it," Obi-Wan replied. "Nothing would please me more, Anakin."

“Be careful, General,” the security guard outside of Mon Mothma’s room cautioned Jan Dodonna. “She’s been pretty agitated today. Has refused to eat a thing all day.”

Dodonna frowned. “Why is that??”

“She thinks the food is poisoned,” the guard replied. “She thinks I don’t notice, but she’s been flushing it down the toilet. I tell you sir, she’s crazy. Watch yourself,” he concluded.

“The commander and I have been friends for many years,” Dodonna told the guard. “I’m not worried.”

“You’re armed, aren’t you sir?”

“I am,” Dodonna replied. “But only because General Reikan insisted upon it.”

“Good,” the guard said, deactivating the door. “Keep your eyes open, sir. She’s pretty crafty.”

Dodonna nodded his understanding. He walked in, looking around the room as he did so. When he saw Mon Mothma, he stopped in his tracks.

“Mon?”

Mon Mothma looked up, her bloodshot eyes staring at him, appraising him coldly as though she had never seen him before in her life. “What do you want?” she asked suspiciously.

Dodonna approached her cautiously, alarmed by the vacant expression in her eyes. “I just want to talk to you,” he said. “Can we talk?”

“I have nothing to say to you,” she said, narrowing her eyes as he drew closer to her.

“We’ve been friends for a long time, Mon,” he said, trying to smile. “Surely we can have a little chat.”

“Friends?? You’re not my friend,” she spat. ‘Friends don’t stab each other in the back! You’re as bad as the rest of them,’ she said. “Just leave me alone!”

“Mon, please,” Dodonna pleaded. “If only you would just listen to reason, we could make this so much easier for everyone. Don’t you know how it kills me to see you like this? Locked up like a criminal?”

Mothma stared at him, the wheels in her head starting to turn. *He still cares... he still has compassion for me... the fool...*

“I’m sorry,” She said contritely, hanging her head. “I...I’m just so scared, Jan. What’s going to happen to me?”

I knew I could reach her, Dodonna thought with relief. *I knew she was still in there somewhere.*

“It’s going to be okay, Mon,” he said reassuringly. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I won’t let them lock you away.”

Lock me away?? Is that what they have planned? She thought in desperation. *I’m not going to let that happen, no matter what it takes...*

Playing the part to the hilt, she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking as she began to weep. Dodonna, heart sick at the sight of his dear friend's emotional collapse, approached her to embrace her.

"There, there," he said, reaching out to her. 'It's okay,' he said. "It's..." he stopped as Mothma's knee connected with his groin. Pain ricocheted through his body, and he doubled over.

"Spare me your sympathy, General!" she snarled as she brought her knee to his face, kicking his nose square on, shattering it and sending shards of cartilage and bone into his frontal lobe. Dodonna fell to the floor, dead before his body made contact with the cold tile. Mothma searched him, realizing that he was undoubtedly armed. Finding the blaster that Reikan had foisted upon the hapless general, she made her way to the door. Aiming it squarely at the door, she activated the door, revealing the alarmed security guard standing there. She didn't hesitate for a moment and shot him squarely in the chest, killing him instantly. And then she started running.

Chapter 85

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It wasn't long before the catastrophe was discovered. Alarm klaxons sounded as the search for the fugitive Mon Mothma raged on.

"This is my fault," Reikan said as he and Han watched the medics carry out the bodies of General Dodonna and the security guard. "If he hadn't been armed, this would not have happened."

"You can't blame yourself, General," Han replied. "Jan was too trusting of her. He should have never let his guard down."

Reikan shook his head. "I can't believe she did this to him," he said angrily. "I want her found, even if it takes every last man on this ship to do it!"

"General Reikan!"

"What is it?" Reikan replied, looking at the young technician who had joined him and Han.

"The droids assigned to the search have found no sign of the commander," he reported. "Their sensors cannot detect her aboard this vessel."

Reikan and Han exchanged a look.

"She'll head straight for Coruscant," Reikan declared.

"No, I don't think she will," Han replied thoughtfully. "She's going to the imperial high command. She'll need their help if she's going to bring down Anakin."

"You mean think that she'd reveal his identity to them? Just out of spite??" Reikan asked incredulously.

Han nodded. "I'd bet my last credit on it."

"Then how can we stop her without being blasted out of the sky by the Empire?" asked the technician.

"I don't know," Han replied. "But I think before we start to formulate a plan, we need to let Anakin and Padmé know what has happened. They need to know that Mon Mothma is on the loose."

Reikan nodded solemnly. "Yes, you're right, Solo. Send word at once."

"Ani, please don't worry," Padmé said as she and Anakin walked hand in hand down the staircase. "Leia is here, the security has been tripled; I'll be fine."

"I know, I know," Anakin replied with a sigh. "I can't help it, Padmé. I will always worry about you; it's just the way I am. Especially now that you are carrying another child," he added, placing a hand on her abdomen with a smile.

Padmé smiled. “And he will be fine too,” she assured him. “I received a glowing report from my doctor just yesterday, so rest assured that little Ani is doing very well.”

“Little Ani,” Anakin repeated. “Have I told you how happy I am that you and I are having another child, Padmé?”

“Not in so many words,” she replied. “But I rather had the impression you felt that way. To tell you the truth, Ani, I wasn’t sure how you would react.”

Anakin frowned. “What do you mean? Surely you realized I’d be thrilled.”

Padmé shrugged. “I’d hoped you would be, but our lives are rather complicated right now. And we didn’t exactly plan this.”

Anakin smiled. “Perhaps we didn’t, but I think this child was meant to be, Padmé. And I for one cannot wait to hold him in my arms and rock him to sleep, and do all the things with him that I never had the chance to do with Luke and Leia.”

“Does that include changing diapers?” Padmé asked with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “Yes, absolutely.”

Padmé nodded, her face becoming thoughtful. “I missed all those things too, Ani,” she said softly. “I didn’t even get to hold Luke and Leia even once when they were born.”

“I’m so sorry, Padmé,” Anakin said, touching her face. “That was thoughtless of me.”

Padmé shook her head and looked back up at him, trying to smile. “But that’s the past,” she said, trying to be brave. “And this child is the future. Just think of how spoiled he will be.”

Anakin nodded with smile. “Yes, I plan to see to that personally.”

Padmé laughed. “I will miss you,” she said, fighting back the tears that seemed to come so easily in her present condition.

“And I you,” Anakin replied. “I will be back in two weeks, no matter what. I promise.”

Padmé nodded. “Okay, have a safe trip,” she said.

Anakin pulled her close. “I will,” he replied, kissing the top of her head. “I love you, Padmé.”

Padmé smiled as the tears came despite her best efforts to keep them in check. “I love you too, Anakin. Be safe.”

Anakin and Luke left within the hour, on their way back to the Outer Rim to continue their quest to clean up the galaxy. Anakin felt uneasy about leaving his wife, even for a short time; though he realized how important his mission was. *Leia won’t let anything happen*, he reasoned. *She will protect her mother well, even if she needs to kill to do it.* The thought of this brought a frown to his face as he remembered how close his daughter had come to killing Mon Mothma. The sight of her eyes turned a sithly yellow was one he would never forget.

“You’re worried about Leia, aren’t you?”

Anakin looked up to see Luke who was watching him closely.

“Yes,” Anakin replied simply. “I am.”

Luke nodded as he sat down with his father. “Me too,” he admitted. “The stronger she gets, the more I worry. I wish Han was around to keep an eye on her.”

“That would certainly make me feel better,” Anakin replied. “But so long as Mon Mothma remains a threat, he is needed on the Rebel Command ship to ensure that she remains contained.”

Luke nodded. “I know,” he replied. “I only hope the other Rebel leaders don’t do something foolish.”

Anakin frowned. “Like what?”

Luke shrugged. “I don’t know,” he replied. “But I can’t shake a bad feeling about that situation. Mon Mothma is a very resourceful woman. She’s more dangerous than they are willing to admit.”

Anakin’s anxiety level raise a notch, as his frown deepened. Luke’s insight was almost as keen as his own; if he felt that there was cause for worry, then that did not bode well.

“Let’s contact your mother,” Anakin said at last. “I want to make sure everything is alright.”

“Okay,” Luke replied, moving to the comm. screen. He stopped as a thought struck him, and he turned back to face his father. “You realize that it’s the middle of the night on Coruscant.”

“That’s right,” Anakin replied in frustrating. ‘Damn, I forgot.’ He thought for a moment. “I suppose it will have to wait until morning then.”

The Imperial Palace was dark and silent, all members of the household asleep. Outside the Imperial guard kept their watch with vigilance, each entrance way secure.

In the office of the Emperor a holographic message appeared on the desk. It was Han Solo. No one, however, was there to receive the message, and so Han’s dire news of the escape of Mon Mothma went unanswered and unnoticed for the time being.

“I suppose it will have to wait until morning,” Han thought in frustration as he received no reply. ‘Damn it,’ he muttered softly, rubbing a hand over his bristly chin. “I think maybe I should deliver this message personally.”

Chewbacca replied with an enthusiastic. “*Yes, and about time I might say, young one.*”

Han stood up. “Yeah, yeah,” he said to his wookiee companion. “Come on, let’s let Reikan know we’re leaving.”

Chapter 86

CHAPTER 86

"I don't care what you were promised by Palpatine, he is dead, in case you have forgotten," Piett told Grand Moff Jerjerrod calmly as he sat behind his desk. "The plans for the new Death Star have been scraped. There will be no new Death Star."

Jerjerrod glared across the table at Piett. "You seem awfully sure of yourself, Admiral," he snapped. "For someone who mere weeks ago was simply another one of Vader's flunkies. Come to think of it, you're *still* one of his flunkies, aren't you?"

Piett narrowed his eyes at the slimy little man. "If you call Supreme Commander of the Imperial Fleet as well as the emperor's right hand a flunkie, then a flunkie be I."

"Don't try to impress me with your titles, Piett," Jerjerrod replied. "Everyone knows that you got to where you are by being Vader's lap dog."

Piett was amused by the man's obvious jealousy and insecurity and merely smiled at his outburst. "Regardless of how I attained the titles, they are mine, nonetheless," he replied at last. "And part of my position includes keeping over ambitious... pretenders in line."

Jerjerrod's face turned red with rage, but he bit back his words. Regardless of how he felt about Piett, he was Vader's right hand, and Vader was now the emperor. To defy Piett was akin to defying Vader. And defying Vader was never a good idea.

"I can assure you that I have been nothing but loyal to the Empire," Jerjerrod said vehemently. "And I resent you implying otherwise."

Piett merely lifted his eyebrows in response.

"May I ask why the Death Star project has been scarped?" Jerjerrod asked hesitantly.

"You may ask," Piett said, picking up a data pad and scanning over it briefly. "However sometimes it is best not to question the Emperor's decisions, don't you think?"

Jerjerrod's frustration level shot up to new heights, yet he said nothing in response. "May I ask, in that case, what my new assignment is since I will obviously not be needed to oversee the construction of the Empire?"

Piett looked up from the datapad. "Funny you should ask that," Piett replied. 'I was just reading your service record right here,' he said, holding up the datapad. "According to this," he said. "You have been quite involved in the brutalization of Rebel prisoners recently," he read. "In fact, there are some reports that you have even gone so far as to take sadistic pleasure in such brutalization, including that of female prisoners." He looked up at Jerjerrod, the disgust for the man plain on his face.

Jerjerrod made no response at first as his mind worked frantically to find an appropriate reply.

“Rebel scum deserves respect, do they?” he asked at last with a disdainful sneer.

Piett felt a flash of anger for the first time since his interview with the Moff had begun. “Yes, they do,” he snapped. “And your blatant disregard for sentient life is highly inappropriate. In case you weren’t aware of it, there are conventions governing the treatment of prisoners, conventions which you have blatantly disregarded.”

Jerjerrod did not reply, but the tone of Peitt’s voice began to make him feel that the consequences of these actions would be far direr than he had ever anticipated.

“Cut out the crap, Piett,” he snapped at last. “What are you driving at? What is it Vader wants from me anyway?”

“He wants nothing from you,” Piett replied, taking his seat again. “Nothing except your sorry carcass in prison.”

Jerjerrod’s eyebrows shot up. “What??” he exclaimed. “On what charges??”

“Do I need to spell it out for you?” Piett replied. “Abuse of prisoners, as well as violations of war conventions. I’m sure if I dug around, I would find several other crimes that could be added to your charges,” he said calmly.

Jerjerrod made no reply, knowing that he truly had not defense to offer.

“Take the Grand Moff to a cell,” Piett ordered the guards who stood at the door. “Be sure that he is made as comfortable as he always made his own prisoners,” he added.

Jerjerrod looked back one last time at Piett as the guard lead him away, hatred filling him. Piett met his gaze, relieved that the vile man was being taken away and out of his presence.

“Admiral Piett, we have a most unusual situation,” Piett’s aide told him as he entered the room.

Piett looked up. “What is that?” he asked.

“We have a Rebel defector who has requested a meeting.”

Piett frowned. “A meeting? The emperor is in the Outer Rim,” he began. “He hasn’t got time to...”

“It isn’t the Emperor she wants to meet with sir,” the aide replied. “It’s you, sir.”

Me?? Piett thought in surprise. *What is this all about?*

“Where is this defector right now?” he asked at last.

“Just left the Sullust System, sir. She is requesting our coordinates. What should I do?”

Piett thought for a moment. *This doesn’t sound right...*

“Nothing yet,” he replied. “I will need to consult the Emperor first.”

“Should I tell her that?” the aide replied.

Piett shook his head. “No,” he said. “Tell her nothing. If she’s serious, then she will contact us again. If not, then we will have avoided a possible security risk. Carry on, lieutenant.”

“Yes sir.”

6

Chapter 87

CHAPTER 87

"Come on; don't be afraid to hurt me, Luke. I can take it," Anakin urged him as the two circled one another, their light sabers held aloft. "You're holding back, I can tell."

"Well yeah, these aren't practice sabers, Dad," Luke reminded him. "I don't want to cut off anything important."

Anakin laughed. "Neither do I," he replied. "But it's all part of the training, son. You need to hone your skills, and that is best done with a real saber."

Luke nodded, bracing himself for another round. The two Skywalkers met, their sabers clashing against one another. Anakin, having the advantages of strength, height and experience, easily repelled each of his son's attacks, teaching him through his counter moves.

"How do you do that?!" Luke asked in exasperation as his father disarmed him easily for the second time in as many matches.

Anakin smiled as he held his hand out and brought Luke's lightsaber to his hand with the Force.

"Patience," he replied. "Experience. In time you'll be disarming me, Luke."

"Somehow I doubt it," Luke muttered, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

Anakin smiled. "Had enough?" he asked.

"For now," Luke replied. "I'm determined to beat you yet, Dad."

"Yes, I know you are," he replied with a smile. "All in good time, my boy; all in good time," he said putting an arm around Luke's shoulders as they left the practice room.

"Your majesty, there is a message from Admiral Piett waiting for you," reported one of the many clones who comprised the crew of the royal cruiser.

"I'll take it in my quarters," Anakin replied. "Let's go," he said to Luke.

Father and son walked to the emperor's quarters and sat down at the communications console. Piett's calm face was on the screen, waiting patiently for Anakin to appear.

"Ah, your majesty," Piett said as he saw Anakin. "So good to see you. I have some rather interesting news."

"What is it, Piett?" Anakin asked without preamble.

"A member of the Rebel Alliance has made contact with this vessel," Piett continued. "She is in our tractor beam right now. She is claiming to be interested in changing allegiance. She said she wants to talk to me personally."

"Did you say *she* wants to talk to you?" Luke said.

“Yes, Luke, it’s a woman. What are you thinking?” Piett asked.

Anakin and Luke exchanged a look. *Mon Mothma*? Luke asked his father.

Impossible, Anakin responded. *She is in the brig. Unless...*

“Piett, stand by,” Anakin replied at last. “I will contact you within the hour. There is something I need to check on.”

“Very good, sir,” Piett replied, and then his face faded from the screen.

“You don’t think she escaped, do you Dad?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know,” Anakin replied as he hailed the Rebel Command ship. “But I mean to find out.” Within a few moments the face of General Reikan appeared. He seemed quite distraught, and more than a little surprised to be receiving a personal message from the emperor.

“Anakin,” Reikan said. “So you’ve heard, then.”

“Heard?” Anakin replied. “What? What has happened? We’ve heard nothing.”

“Mon Mothma is at large,” Reikan replied. “She killed Jan Dodonna as well as the security guard in charge of her cell. From what we can tell she took one of the Imperial shuttles we’ve managed to acquire and has left the system. We have no idea where she is.”

“We know exactly where she is,” Luke replied.

“Where??” Reikan asked at once.

“Waiting to be brought on board the Executor,” Anakin replied. “She’s defecting. Or at least that’s what she is pretending to do.”

“Don’t let her on board that ship, Anakin,” Reikan warned. “She’ll blow your cover sky high. She’s mad, I tell you; utterly mad. She wants revenge on you, on Padmé, on your whole family.”

“Revenge for what??” Luke exclaimed. “What is behind this hostility of hers??”

“It seems she disapproved of your parents’ clandestine relationship,” Reikan replied. “And blames your parents for the destruction of the Republic.”

“That’s preposterous,” Anakin retorted hotly. “Padmé had nothing to do with that! I can understand her hating me, but why Padmé??”

“I think jealousy is a large part of it, sir,” Reikan replied. “But it’s hard to say; she’s crazy, her motivations are not rational.”

Anakin ran a hand through his hair in frustration. And then a thought struck him. “Don’t worry, General,” he said. “We have the situation in control.”

“Keep me posted,” Reikan said.

“We will,” Luke replied as he discontinued the contact. He looked at his father. “You were right,” he said.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Anakin muttered, raising Piett again. “Piett, it’s Mon Mothma, she’s escaped.”

“Indeed,” Piett replied, his ever calm demeanor not registering any surprise. “This does make for an interesting situation, doesn’t it?”

Anakin smiled. “Yes, it does indeed,” he replied. “Obviously she doesn’t know that you know who I am, otherwise she’d not have come to you.”

Piett nodded. “Obviously not,” he concurred. “What should I do? Bring her on board?”

Anakin thought for a moment. “What are your coordinates?” he asked.

Piett transmitted them at once.

“He’s less than two parsecs away,” Anakin said to Luke.

“Yeah, so?” Luke replied, and then he realized what his father meant to do. “You are a genius,” he said simply in amazement.

Anakin smiled. “Piett, bring her on board, keep her in confinement. And I do mean confinement; she is dangerous and liable to do anything. Post 5 or 6 clones to her. I will rendezvous with you in...4.5 hours.”

Piett’s face registered surprise for the first time during the entire conversation. “Understood, sir. I look forward to seeing you both.”

“Let’s go,” Anakin said, standing up. “I want to make sure we’re there as soon as possible even if I have to sit on the hyperdrive to keep it warm.”

Luke laughed. “Now that I’d like to see.”

Chapter 88

CHAPTER 88

“Good morning ladies.”

Padmé and Leia looked up from their breakfast to see Han Solo and Chewbacca standing in the room.

“Han!!” Leia exclaimed, jumping from her seat to greet him. “What are you doing here?” she asked after giving him an enormous hug.

“Well, the truth of it is,” Han replied as he and Chewbacca sat down. “Chewie here could smell this delicious breakfast all the way from Sullust, and I couldn’t hold him back,” he joked.

Chewbacca rolled his eyes and quipped, *if that’s your idea of humor, small one, you are sadly mistaken, as usual*. He did, however, help himself to the platter of freshly baked scones within his reach.

Padmé only smiled, knowing Han well enough by now that he often made jokes, even poor ones, when he was worried about something. *Must be really bad after that stinker*, she mused.

“All kidding aside,” Han said, “I’m afraid I have some bad news. Mon Mothma has managed to escape.”

Leia and her mother exchanged a look of alarm. “Escape??” Leia exclaimed. “How did that happen??”

“General Dodonna went to see her,” Han explained. ‘He was convinced that he could get her to see reason. She killed him,’ he said, his outrage over the senseless death returning. “She killed the man in cold blood, took his blaster and killed the security guard, and then took off.”

“She left the ship? You’re certain of this?” Padmé asked, trying to remain calm.

Han nodded. “I’m afraid so,” he replied. “Sensor sweeps couldn’t locate her anywhere on the ship, and it wasn’t long after her break out that it was discovered that one of the Imperial shuttles was missing. She’s gone, Padmé. Where she is, is anyone’s guess.”

Leia frowned, feeling her own outrage at this dire news welling up within her. “I think I can guess,” she said. “She’s probably on her way here right now.”

“I don’t think so, Leia,” Padmé replied. “She must realize that we would expect such a move, and that the security measures we have in place now would preclude her from attempting anything here. No, I’m afraid she’s set her sites a little higher this time.”

“What do you mean?” Leia asked.

“She’s going after your father,” Han said, following Padmé’s line of thinking. “She’s going to expose him for who he truly is to the Imperial high command. At least that’s my guess.”

"I think it's a sound one," Padmé concurred. "Does Anakin know about this?"

"I don't know," Han replied. "I left the command ship to come here because I was unable to raise you. I guess everybody was asleep."

Leia frowned. "There should have been someone manning that comm. station," she muttered, frustrated with the oversight.

Han smiled. "Yeah, maybe," he agreed. "But it gave me an excuse to come and see you, didn't it?"

Leia looked at him and smiled. "Yes, it did that," she replied, reaching out and taking his hand. "What are we going to do now?"

"We must contact your father," Padmé said, standing up. "If he doesn't already know, he must be warned."

"Where are Anakin and Luke now?" Han asked as he and Leia stood up to join Padmé.

"I will have to check his itinerary," Padmé replied. "He left me a very detailed one," she added with a smile.

"Come on, Chewie!" Han said when they reached the doorway. "You can eat later!"

Reluctantly, Chewbacca stood up and left the delicious meal before him, grumbling under his breath about the bossiness of one Corellian pilot.

"Welcome to the *Executor*, your majesty," Piett declared formally as he and the detachment of clones and officers knelt before Anakin and Luke as they descended the ramp from their shuttle.

"Stand up, Piett," Anakin muttered, embarrassed by all the ostentation. "You're over doing it just a little, don't you think?"

Piett stood up and smiled. "Nothing is too grand for the galactic emperor, sir," he quipped.

Anakin shook his head. "do you have her on board?"

"Yes sir," he replied. "She's fit to be tied, I must warn you."

"What's the problem?" Luke asked.

Piett sighed. "Well, I think she was expecting a much warmer reception," he remarked. "The fact that she is locked up with half a dozen storm troopers outside her door is rather insulting to her."

Luke snorted. "Too bad," he countered. "It should be an entire legion after what she has done."

"What exactly *has* she done, sir?" Piett asked. "I'm assuming sating has happened that enabled her to escape."

"She killed one of her comrades," Anakin replied. "Jan Dodonna, one of the other Rebel commanders. Killed him in cold blood, and then took his weapon, using it to secure her escape."

Piett shook his head. "Incredible," he muttered. "She truly has lost her mind, then, hasn't she?"

"She lost it a long time ago," Luke replied "when she kidnapped my mother."

Anakin nodded. "I agree," he replied.

"So what are you going to do with her?" Piett asked. "She obviously isn't a woman you can take lightly."

"No, she isn't," Anakin concurred. "the old Darth Vader would have killed her long ago."

"And the new one?" Luke asked.

Anakin remained silent as he considered this. "I don't know yet, Luke," he admitted. "Let's talk to her first, and then we can decide upon our course of action. No doubt seeing me will bring out the worst in her."

Luke smiled. "Yes, no doubt it will. I can't wait to see the look on her face."

"He's not in the sector he's scheduled to be in," Padmé reported, a frown on her face. "Where could he be?"

"Contact the ship," Han suggested. "Maybe something came up."

Leia and Padmé looked at one another. *Something came up...* Was this a euphemism for disaster??

Padmé raised the royal cruiser, and it wasn't long before she was speaking to one of Anakin's aides.

"What can I do for you, your majesty?" the man asked obsequiously.

"I need to speak with my husband," Padmé replied without preamble. "At once."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible," the aide replied. "Emperor Vader is not on board."

Padmé's alarm increased. "Where is he?? Is Lord Vengeance available?"

The aide shook his head. "No, my lady, both Emperor Vader and Lord Vengeance are currently on board the *Executor*."

"The *Executor*??" Padmé replied. "Why?? What is going on?"

"A rebel defector has been brought on board, my empress," the aide explained. "The emperor and his apprentice have gone there to interrogate her."

Her?? "Thank you," Padmé said, turning off the screen. She turned to Han and Leia. "There's only one person he can be talking about," she said.

Leia nodded. "Yes, Mothma. You were right, Mother; both of you were right," she added, turning to Han. "She's gone to the Empire."

Han nodded. "Yeah, but remember who's in charge of that ship now, sweetheart. Admiral Piett."

Padmé nodded, a smile starting on her face. “Yes, of all the people in the Empire she chose to go to, she could not have chosen better.”

Leia understood what her mother meant; Piett was loyal to Anakin beyond question, and would not allow Mon Mothma to cause any trouble for him or the rest of the Skywalker family. Their secret was more than safe with Firmus Piett. *So why does the thought of my father speaking to that mad woman bother me so much?*

“I have a bad feeling about this,” she said at last.

“Don’t worry,” Han assured her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “No way is that nut job going to get off *that* ship. I’ll bet Piett has an entire legion outside her door right now.”

“You’re probably right,” Leia concurred. *But somehow that doesn’t make me feel any better.*

“Come on, let’s go finish our breakfast,” Padmé said. “Baby Ani is still hungry. I’m sure your father will contact us as soon as his meeting with her is over, Leia. Try not to worry.”

Leia stood up and walked out of the office with Han and her mother, doing her best to quell the feelings of unease that were blooming within her.

Chapter 89

CHAPTER 89

Mon Mothma paced about in her cell. She was furious that the Empire had locked her up like a criminal; didn't they know who she was?? Surely they realized someone of her importance was not made to wait like this, someone who had the sort of information that she had should not be treated like a prisoner and locked up like a common thief. *Fools...* she thought contemptuously. *If they think this is the way to win my allegiance, they have another thing coming...*

Her twisted musings were interrupted by the door opening, and the entrance of several clone troopers. She stood up, eying them closely, seeing who it was that had come to speak with her at last. *It had better be Piett; he'd better not have sent one of his underlings to me, or I won't tell him a bloody thing.*

The clones stepped aside, revealing Piett standing alongside a large figure in an ebony cloak, along with a smaller man dressed in the same manner. There was no mistaking who the huge imposing man was; there was only one man who could command such authority and power without saying a single word. *Anakin Skywalker.*

"So nice to see you again, Commander," the large cloaked figure said, his voice laced with sarcasm. "I understand you have some burning need to speak to someone in charge?"

Mothma stood trembling with rage. *Betrayed....Piett had betrayed her!!! He knew, all along he knew!!!* She turned to Piett, loathing him utterly, despising the mild mannered expression on his face.

"You," she said, walking towards him slowly. "You used me... you knew all along that he was the emperor, didn't you? And yet you reeled me in!"

"It was actually quite considerate of you to turn yourself in, Commander," Piett remarked. "I understand you are wanted on several felonies now, including murder. Our....incarceration of you will go a long way to paving the road to peace with the Rebel Alliance."

"The Rebel Alliance will never make peace with the Empire," she spat. "Not so long as Anakin Skywalker is Emperor!"

"You short sighted fool," Piett snapped. "Anakin Skywalker is the only hope the galaxy has for peace. If peace is what you truly wanted, then you'd see that. Obviously you are just too bent on revenge for something from the past that you can't see the truth right before your eyes."

"The past??" Mothma said, holding up her prosthetic hand. "This happened less than a month ago, I hardly consider that *the past*. His daughter did this to me," she cried, pointing at Anakin. "A Sith, just like her father!"

"My sister is not a Sith!!" Luke exclaimed, stepping forward, unable to hold his tongue any longer. "Can you blame her for attacking you after what you did to Han? To our mother??"

You're lucky she didn't cut you to pieces when she had the chance."

"Well she did try to," Mothma said, indicating her hand once again. "And I see you are following in Daddy's footsteps too, Luke. How charming; no doubt the new Skywalker brat will be just as talented in the ways of the Sith arts."

"Enough!!" Anakin roared, furious at the woman's ranting. "I've heard enough of your slander!"

"Mon Mothma," Piett intoned. "You are hereby sentenced to be executed by lethal injection. Execution shall be carried out at..."

"NO!!" Mothma screamed, rushing at Piett. Before he could react, the mad woman had wrapped her hands around his throat, and was squeezing with all her might. "You'll pay for your treachery, Pi..." She didn't even finish her threat, as all 8 storm troopers in the room open fire on her. Within moments, she was dead, her body riddled with holes.

Piett coughed, trying to regain his breath, shaken up by what had just occurred. Anakin came over to his friend and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you alright??" he asked anxiously.

Piett nodded, taking deep breaths. "I... I think so," he replied, looking down with horror at the smoking remains of his dead assailant. "She was truly mad," he muttered, shaking his head.

"Yes, she was," Anakin said, looking down at her as well. After a moment he looked up at the clones. 'Get rid of the body,' he said. *Why wouldn't you listen to reason, Commander? Why did you let it come to this?* He turned to his son. "Come, Lord Vengeance," he said. "We'd best inform the Rebel Alliance of what has happened here."

Luke nodded, and followed his father out of the cell along with a still shaken Piett, leaving the clones to clean up the mess of the carnage within.

"Anakin?? Oh Ani, I'm so relieved to see you!!" Padmé said as she saw her husband's face materialize on the comm. screen. "Did you meet with Mon Mothma?? Your aide told us how she was on board the *Executor*, and that..."

"Mon Mothma is dead, Padmé," Anakin interjected. "She died less than half an hour ago."

"What?? How? What happened??" Padmé asked as Leia and Han looked at one another in surprise.

"She was shot dead when she attacked Piett," Anakin replied. "She was mad, Padmé; truly and completely mad. She came here thinking she could betray me to the Empire; the only thing was she didn't count on my right hand man knowing my true identity."

Padmé shook her head. "Is Firmus alright?" she asked. "How did she attack him?"

"He will be," Anakin assured her. 'She tried to choke him with her bare hands, Padmé,' Anakin said, hardly believing it himself despite the fact that he had witnessed the intense, bizarre episode. "The clones opened fire on her, eight of them, and killed her in seconds."

Padmé could not help but feel a twinge of sadness at the passing of Mothma, despite all that she had put her family through. Padmé remembered the Mon Mothma from years earlier, the vibrant, strong woman she had been, the woman who had forged the Rebel Alliance and taken on the Empire; but that woman had ceased to exist many months earlier. The Mon Mothma who had died so horribly on board the *Executor* was a shadow of the great woman she had once been, a woman who'd had such high hopes for peace in the galaxy, who'd dedicated her life to achieving it. *How was it possible that she could have fallen so far?*

"Well that's a relief," Han said at last, voicing everyone's sentiments. "Does Reikan know?" he asked.

Anakin shook his head. "No, not yet," he replied. "Perhaps you could relay the message to him, Han. It would probably be best coming from you."

Han nodded. "Sure thing, Anakin," he replied. "I'll let him know right away."

"Anakin, come home," Padmé said, seeing the exhaustion and stress in his face. "Forget the mission right now, just come home."

Anakin nodded. "I was thinking that very same thing," he said with a smile. "I think Luke and I could use a few days off."

"I couldn't agree more," Padmé replied with a smile. "Hurry home."

Chapter 90

CHAPTER 90

“Dead? How? What happened, Solo?”

Han sighed deeply, rubbing his chin with his hand. “Just as I predicted, she went straight to the Empire. Only she didn’t realize that the new commander of the Imperial fleet is one of Anakin’s strongest supporters, Firmus Piett. Piett brought her on board the flagship and contacted Anakin, who came as soon as he found out that Piett had Mothma in his custody. When she saw Anakin and Luke, she put it together that Piett had tricked her, and that he and Anakin were in fact allies. That’s when she lost it. She attacked Piett during the interrogation,” Han explained. “Tried to choke him to death, so the storm troopers just let her have it. It was over in a matter of seconds from what I understand.”

Reikan frowned deeply, nodding his understanding. “I can’t believe it came down to this,” he said sadly. “She was such a great woman, such a great leader...”

“She was,” Han agreed. “But in the end, she went crazy, General; you know that. She was a murderer, she killed one of her best friends in cold blood. There was no way she could be left unchecked.”

“No, of course not,” Reikan replied. “But shot down like a common criminal by clone troopers? Hardly a fitting end for such a remarkable woman.”

Han didn’t know what to say. While he understood Reikan’s sadness over the loss of the woman who had once been his comrade and friend, it almost seemed as though Reikan had forgotten all that Mothma had put them all through in recent weeks.

“I suppose,” Han said at last. “But she’s gone, General; and the galaxy is a lot safer now that she is.”

“You’re right, Solo,” Reikan said. “I can’t deny that. I only hope that with her gone negotiations with the Empire can finally get started.”

“I know how anxious Anakin is to make that happen,” Han told him. “He is on his way home.”

Reikan nodded. “Good. Perhaps now that the danger is past, we can start the peace process.”

Yeah, let’s hope so, Han thought. He closed off the communications and returned to Leia and Padmé.

“How did he take the news?” Padmé asked.

Han shrugged. “Just as you’d imagine,” he replied. “He’s hopeful that this will mean peace talks can start soon.”

Leia nodded. "Yes, we all hope that. But father still has a lot of work to do to clean up the Empire before that can happen. He's only just begun the process."

"Yeah, I know," Han replied.

"But the fact that he is doing it at shows the Alliance how serious he is about repairing the galaxy," Padmé put in. "And hopefully the leaders who are left will see that."

"Let's hope so," Leia said. "But I can't shake this feeling that we're not out of the woods yet."

"Will you relax!" Han said, putting his arm around her. "I know how you felt about Mothma, what a danger she posed to your family; but she's gone now, Leia. She's dead."

"I know that," Leia replied tersely. "But she had allies, Han; or have you forgotten that? I can't help but think that those allies will come out of the woodwork now that she is dead."

Padmé felt a chill go up her spine at her daughter's comment, remembering suddenly the ruthless manner in which that nameless woman had abducted her; and who had been behind the abduction? Mon Mothma. *What had happened to that woman? Where was she? Did she know what had befallen Mon Mothma?* Suddenly Padmé didn't feel safe anymore, and wondered if she ever would again.

"Damn, I forgot about that," Han muttered, looking at Padmé. "We can't let out guard down for a moment. Mothma will no doubt be a martyr to them now."

Padmé nodded her understanding, realizing that the situation was now much worse than it had been. How many allies did she have? What orders had they been left with? And when would they strike? There was no way of knowing, she realized with consternation. No way at all. *Hurry home, Anakin... I need you now more than ever.*

Anakin and Luke arrived at the Imperial Palace the next day. Anakin found Padmé reading over a report in the garden. She looked up suddenly when she heard footsteps, and relaxed immediately when she saw that it was Anakin. She smiled and stood up to meet him.

"I'm so glad you're home," she said as he embraced her warmly.

Anakin frowned, sensing the great waves of anxiety emanating from his wife. He held her at arms length and looked at her face. "What is it, Padmé? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, trying to shake off her fears. *He's here now, everything will be fine...* "Just hormones," she added with a smile.

"Why do I think there's more to it?" he replied, not convinced.

Padmé looked up at him, unable to hide her feelings from him. "I'm frightened, Ani," she said quietly.

Anakin had known Padmé for many years, and in that time there had only been a handful of times that he had ever seen her genuinely afraid, and even fewer times that she'd actually admitted it. It unnerved him.

"Mon Mothma is dead, Padmé," he assured her gently. "I saw her get blasted to Hell by eight storm troopers; I promise you, she won't harm you again."

“I know that,” Padmé replied. “But what about that woman who abducted me, Anakin? What if she’s still out there? She told me she had three colleagues; what if there are more??”

Anakin frowned, angry with himself for not thinking of this. *No wonder she is so afraid... those maniacs could be anywhere.*

“I’m sorry angel,” he said, “I guess in my preoccupation with catching Mon Mothma, I forgot about that.”

“I did too,” Padmé admitted. “It was Leia who remembered, not me. What are we going to do, Ani? They could be anywhere! How can we guard against someone like that??”

Anakin released her and commenced pacing. It frustrated him greatly that he had not thought of this, and even more so that the situation was so complicated. *How do I protect my wife from an unknown assailant who could be anywhere?*

“We’ll find a way, Padmé,” he said at last. “I promise you. I won’t let anyone harm you, never again.”

“I know you won’t,” she said, stepping over to him again. “I’m so glad you’re home,” she added as he held her close once again.

Chapter 91

I know this chapter is short, but the story is winding down (but not before the big climax you all know is coming) and I think a lot of them will be as the action heats up.

CHAPTER 91

"No Padmé, no way," Anakin said, shaking his head as he paced in their bedroom. "I will not allow it! End of story!"

Padmé folded her arms as she watched him from their bed. "Anakin, will you just listen at least? This is perfect! How else are we going to find these people?"

Anakin stopped his pacing and turned to his wife. "I *will* find them, Padmé," he vowed. "Make no mistake about it. But this idea of yours is just too damn dangerous!"

"How much danger can I possibly be in with three Jedi protecting me?" she said with a smile. "Four if you count Leia, who is practically one already. Not to mention all the clone troopers, all the royal guards..."

"Padmé, these are devious, desperate people," he averred. "They don't care about their own deaths, so long as they meet their objective. And if they are allies of Mon Mothma, then they are sure to be crazy, just like she was. I simply won't stand for you putting yourself in jeopardy this way!"

Padmé sighed, growing frustrated with her husband's refusal to see things from her point of view. "Anakin, put yourself in my position," she said. "Do you think I enjoy living in constant fear? It's not good for me, Ani; it's not good for the baby. This kind of stress isn't good for either of us. By giving these maniacs an opportunity to strike, we are drawing them into a trap. It's perfect! Don't you remember how we drew the assassins back when you and Obi-Wan were protecting me? That worked, didn't it?"

Anakin frowned. "Yes, but you were only centimeters away from being bitten by those deadly kohuns, as I recall," he reminded her. "And would have died instantly if they'd reached you before I did."

"But they didn't," she said. "And you did reach me in time. You always will, Ani; and Luke and Leia will be there helping you, as well as Master Yoda, Han, Chewbacca....it's foolproof!"

Anakin sighed. *I hate it when she's right*, he thought to himself. "I will go along this under one condition, Padmé," he said at last.

"What is that?" she asked.

"That once this mess is all behind us, you retire from politics until the baby is born," he said.

Padmé was about to object, but she looked at him, and could see in his eyes just how serious he was, how afraid he was. *This must be eating him alive*, she thought. *All he wants to*

do is protect me... protect us.

"If that's what you want, Ani," she replied at last. "Then I will do it."

Anakin smiled and nodded his head. "Thanks, angel," he said.

She held her hand out to him and he took it, climbing back into bed with her. "I only want what is best for you, Padmé," he told her as she snuggled up against him. "You know that, don't you?"

"I know," she said, kissing his bare chest.

"I've never forgiven myself for what happened, Padmé," he continued, needing to get it off his chest. "I was supposed to be protecting you then, and all I ended up doing was nearly destroying you, you and the twins. As it was, I forced you to live half your life alone, away from your children..."

"Ani, don't," she said, laying a finger over his lips. "We all know what happened in the past. And I know it still eats away at you. But you are different man now, Anakin; a remade man. You can't compare yourself to the person you were back then, for you are not the same person. Please don't underestimate the remarkable man you have become, Ani."

Anakin looked down at the woman in his arms and smiled. "You're the remarkable one, Padmé," he said, kissing the top of her head. "And I count myself blessed every day to have you back in my life again."

Padmé smiled. "That's nice to know," she said, nestling into his strong, warm embrace.

Anakin stroked her hair gently, his mind deep in thought. "You think Solo could learn to use a lightsaber?" he asked "What about the wookiee?"

Padmé looked up at him. "I think you need to get your mind off of this," she said with a smile.

"And how exactly do you propose I do that?" he asked.

"I have an idea," she said, pulling him down to kiss him.

Chapter 92

CHAPTER 92

"I don't think this is such a good idea," Han said as he and Chewbacca stood in the gymnasium, each holding a practice lightsaber in their hands.

"Why not?" asked Luke. "You've used a lightsaber before."

"Yeah, once," Han grumbled, looking down at the foreign object in his hand. "Slicing through a dead tauntaun ain't exactly the same as fighting though, kid. Besides, what's wrong with blasters? Blasters are good."

Luke and Leia exchanged an amused look.

"Just think of it as expanding your horizons," Luke said, twirling his weapon in his hand.

"*Nothing wrong with that, is there small one?*" Chewbacca asked, already feeling quite comfortable.

"No, it's not that," Han replied. "It's just that... hell, I don't want to cut off anything vital if you know what I mean."

Luke laughed, remembering himself saying the same thing to his father.

"It's okay, Han," Leia said, hand on her hip. "It you're too scared to try, we understand, don't we Luke?"

"Yep, no problem at all," Luke replied, following his sister's lead. "Nothing wrong with being scared."

Chewbacca chuckled, earning a dirty look from Han. "Traitor," he grumbled. He sighed, realizing that his reputation not to mention his ego was on the line. 'Alright, alright,' he said at last, gripping the practice saber tighter. "Let's do this."

Padmé walked through the Great Hall, inspecting the arrangements that had begun to come together. After nearly a month of preparations, the stage was almost set. What was being billed as the emperor's birthday party was already being touted as the social event of the year. Padmé had made certain that no expense had been spared, and that the media had been given plenty of information about the upcoming event. There wasn't a being in the Core who didn't know about the party; which had been Padmé's goal all along.

The month since Mon Mothma's death had been quiet, far too quiet for Anakin and Padmé liking. Whoever the allies of the dead commander were, they were keeping a low profile. Anakin was hoping that this was a sign that they were merely biding their time, waiting for an opportunity to strike. With over 100 guests present, there was bound to be such an opportunity at the emperor's party.

Anakin had spent many anxious, fitful nights during this time as the big day grew near. Yes, security was tight as a drumhead; yes, there would be four Jedi present, as well as Han

Solo and Chewbacca. There was no way anyone could get close to Padmé, no way at all. So *why can't I get rid of this bad feelings?*

"I'll be so happy when this party is behind us," Padmé said as she emerged from the fresher.

From the bed, Anakin watched his wife as she stood before him brushing her hair. He smiled as his eyes rested on the bump that was now visible on her tiny frame.

"Me too," he said. "You know how much I love parties."

Padmé laughed. "Yes, only too well," she replied, setting her brush down. She walked over to the bed, stopping suddenly when she reached the end of it.

"What is it?" Anakin asked, concerned by the look on her face.

Padmé smiled. "Come here," she said.

Anakin moved to the end of the bed and swung his legs over the edge.

"Feel this," Padmé said as she took his hand and placed it on her bump.

Anakin spread his hand open, excited to feel his tiny son's movements for the first time. Padmé of course had been feeling them for weeks, but it had never been strong enough for him to feel; until now. But try as he might, all Anakin could feel was the silk of his wife's nightgown and the warmth of her body underneath.

"I don't feel anything..." he stopped as he felt a slight, barely perceptive movement. It was very light, but definitely there. He smiled, awed by this evidence of new life. "That's incredible," he said, looking up at her with an enormous grin.

Padmé nodded. "Already doing his Jedi calisthenics," she said with a smile.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it seems so," he said. He felt another movement, like the brushing of a bird's wings against his finger tips. "He's strong," he commented, paternal pride filling him.

Padmé smiled. "His father's son," she commented.

Anakin grinned. "I can't wait for this baby to be born, Padmé," he said. "I can't wait to see him, to hold him."

"Neither can I," she said. "Though I have to admit that I don't look forward to labor again," she added, frowning at the memory of the agony she went through giving birth to Luke and Leia.

Anakin frowned. "Oh yeah," he said. "I'm sure that isn't exactly a picnic, is it?"

Padmé shook her head. "No, I wouldn't say so. But it won't be so hard this time. For one thing, there's only one. And for another, you'll be with me. You *will* be with me when he's born, won't you Ani?"

"Of course I will," he replied, more than a little anxious at the thought of seeing his beloved wife in such pain. "I'll be right there at your side, where I should have been when Luke and Leia were born."

Padmé put her hand over his. "This will be the start of a whole new life for us, Ani."

Anakin nodded. *A whole new life... one I won't mess up this time.*

"Come on, time to get some sleep," she said, climbing into bed. "Tomorrow is a big day."

Anakin felt his anxiety level shoot up again at the thought of what the next day would bring. "Yes, so it is," he said, as Padmé nestled into his arms.

5

Chapter 93

Chapter 93

A live orchestra was performing on the terrace behind the palace, the doors were open and the scent of summer blossoms wafted into the Great Hall. Guests mingled inside, on the terrace, and down in the garden area below. To the outsider it seemed like a grand affair, a spectacular celebration of the emperor's birthday. To the members of the household it was an evening full of tension and dreadful anticipation.

Anakin had not left his wife's side the entire evening, not trusting even the Imperial guards with her safety. Yoda, Luke and Leia had each taken an area to patrol, with Chewbacca, Han and Pielt as backup. Han had eventually given up on the lightsaber, assuring Luke and Leia that he was far more lethal with a blaster. They had agreed. Chewbacca, however, had quite taken to this new weapon and wielded it like a master.

"Perhaps we were wrong about this," Padmé said, starting to feel fatigued as the evening wore on. "Maybe we've all been worried for nothing."

Anakin shook his head, his eyes never leaving the scattered groups of guests before them. "They have to be here, Padmé," he told her, despite the doubt starting to form in his mind. "This is their perfect chance. They are just waiting for the right moment."

Padmé could feel the hair on the back of her neck stand on end at his pronouncement. "Maybe," she replied. "But maybe not. Maybe this is too obvious."

Anakin looked at her. *She's right*, he thought. *They are too clever not to realize that we'd expect them to strike here.* "I suppose that's a possibility," he conceded at last.

"But if not now, then when? When?" she asked in exasperation.

Anakin frowned, frustration filling him. "I don't know," he muttered, hating the thought of this unbearable tension going on indefinitely. "I thought this would be the perfect way to draw them out, but perhaps we've underestimated them. I won't do that again."

Padmé sighed, frustrated that her hunch had been wrong.

"Sire, the fireworks display is about to commence."

Anakin turned to the servant. "You may commence," he told the servant. *Was this it?* He wondered. *Could this be the moment of truth?* His eyes surveyed the room, his Jedi senses attuned to the slightest change, the slightest elevation in tension. But there was no sign of either; the room seemed as calm as ever, with all present merely enjoying the evening, anticipating the upcoming pyrotechnics display.

"Shall we, your majesty?" he asked, offering his arm to Padmé.

She took his arm and they walked out onto the terrace to enjoy the fireworks, Imperial guards flanking them.

From across the room, the Imperial royal couple was being watched by a pair of men disguised as delegates from the Anoat System.

"Too many Jedi here," one of them said quietly to the other. "This isn't going to work."

The other man nodded. "Time to abort and get the hell out of here."

"Agreed," the first man said, activating a COM link.

On the other side of the room, a woman responded. "What?" she asked.

"Too hot in here, Tyria. Abort mission and get out. Do you copy?"

"I copy," she replied. "I'm moving out."

The guests applauded as the fireworks display drew to an end. No one thought it strange that a group of three delegates, two men and a woman, left before they had concluded.

"Well, that was a painful experience," Han said as he and Leia stood outside on the terrace later that night. The guests had departed, and everyone else had gone to bed. "I was sure they'd show up."

"Dad figures it was too obvious," Leia replied, leaning on the railing. "I think he's right."

"So all this was for nothing then," Han said.

Leia shrugged. "Well, my father got a huge pile of gifts," she said with a smile. "That I'm sure he'll just love opening," she added wryly.

Han laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure. You know what this means, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied. "It means we'll have to be looking over our shoulders all the time now, until they decide to make their move, whenever that will be."

"I think that's their idea," Han said. "They probably figure if they lay low long enough we'll get complacent and forget about them."

Leia snorted. "Fat chance," she said. "My father won't rest until they are caught. He's rather single minded when he gets something in his mind, too."

"Runs in the family," Han commented with a grin.

Leia smiled. "I guess so." She frowned as she thought of her mother. 'This will be so hard for Mother,' she said. "She shouldn't have to worry about this with the baby coming."

"Your mom is a very strong woman," Han said. "She won't let this ruin the experience."

"I hope not," Leia replied. "Things weren't exactly stress free for her when she was expecting Luke and I either. I guess being the wife of the Chosen One has its challenges."

"Yeah, no kidding," Han agreed. "I wonder what being the wife of a scruffy looking nerf herder would be like."

Leia frowned. "Han, what are you talking about??"

Han shuffled his feet, shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away from her. "Well, I just wondering if...well, if you'd be interested in finding out."

“Han, will you just speak plainly? For once?” Leia said in exasperation.

“You don’t like to make anything easy, do you your highnessness?” Han retorted. “I’m trying to ask you to marry me! Is that plain enough?”

Leia stared at him, unsure she’d heard him correctly. “You... you want me to marry you?” she asked.

Han nodded. “Yeah, what do you say, Leia? Will you marry me?”

Leia smiled. “You mean it? Really?”

Han rolled his eyes. “Yes! Geez Leia, could you cut me a break here? I’m putting myself out on a limb!”

She laughed and came over to him at once. “Yes, Han,” she said at last. “I will.”

Han sighed with relief. “Now, was that so hard?” he said, as he pulled her to him for a kiss.

Chapter 94

Chapter 94

Anakin awoke the next morning alone in the bed. He turned and looked at the chrono on the side of the bed and saw that it was still quite early. *Where is Padmé?* He wondered.

Just then she emerged from the fresher, looking quite pale.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned at once by her pallor.

She nodded. “Yes,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “Just little Ani saying good morning,” she added with a wan smile.

“How long does this last?” Anakin asked, moving over to her and rubbing her back gently. “This morning sickness?”

“With Luke and Leia it was about six weeks,” she said. “I started feeling better around the middle of the fourth month. So soon, Ani, soon. Don’t worry, this is perfectly natural.”

“That doesn’t make me worry any less, Padmé,” he grumbled. ‘And I do not like the idea of leaving you here,’ he added. “Those vermin are probably just waiting for me to do so, and then they’ll make their move. I know how scum like that thinks, Padmé. The fact that you are pregnant won’t matter to them; they will use that to their advantage.”

Padmé sat at the vanity with her back to him. His words bothered her; not simply because they were frightening, but also because they revealed just how terrified he was that something would happen to her. *He was terrified of losing me once before... and that drove him to the Dark Side.*

“Ani, the palace is crawling with clone troopers and royal guards,” she pointed out to him. “Not only that, Leia, Han and Chewbacca are here. If we are ever to dissolve this sham of an Empire, you have to continue the dismantling process that you and Luke have started. I don’t want to spend the next ten years as Empress; do you want to be emperor indefinitely?”

“No, of course not,” he replied. ‘But neither do I want to put you in danger. Not for anything.’

Padmé turned to him. “Ani, did you ever consider that perhaps it is *you* who are the target, not me?”

Anakin frowned. “Me?” he said. “What makes you think so?”

Padmé stood up and walked over to where he sat on the edge of their bed. “Because you are the emperor,” she said, putting her hands on his shoulders. ‘Because you have a past that these people cannot forget nor forgive,’ she continued. “And because you aren’t expecting it to be you that they attack.”

Anakin sighed. “Well, even if you’re right, they don’t stand a chance,” he told her. “Not with Luke at my side, the royal guards around, the clone troopers...” he stopped and smiled. “Ah, I think I see the point you were making earlier.”

Padmé laughed. “Good, now come on downstairs, little Ani is hungry.”

Anakin and Padmé were met on the stairs by Han Solo, who seemed rather edgy, and looked as though he had been waiting for them to appear.

“Good morning, Han,” Padmé greeted him. “Coming down for breakfast?”

“Uh, yes, in a few minutes, thanks,” he replied. “I was kinda hoping I could talk to you first, Anakin, sir, in private.”

Anakin raised an eyebrow and looked at Padmé. *This better not be what I think it is*, he thought. “Whatever you need to say to me, you can say to my wife as well, Solo,” he replied.

“Oh okay,” Han replied, wiping his palms on his pants nervously. “Sure thing.”

“Shall we?” Padmé said, leading the two men into a nearby sitting room.

Anakin sat down with his wife, enjoying Han’s discomfiture immensely. He knew exactly what the ex-smuggler wanted to talk about, and yet he wanted Han to dance for as long as possible. *This kind of entertainment doesn’t come around too often*, he told himself.

“We’re listening,” Anakin said at last, looking Han straight in the eye in the way he knew made the young man nervous.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Han began, pacing the room. ‘Leia and me, and I... no, and me... well we... we’ve kind of had a thing going,’ he stopped as the look in Anakin’s eyes nearly sent him running from the room. “No, not *that* kind of thing, I swear!” he averred, starting to really sweat. “It’s just that... I love her, I love your daughter,” he said at last, letting his feelings speak for him. “She drives me crazy, but I love her, and she loves me. At least most of the time... well anyway, I was hoping that, well I’ve asked her already and she... what I mean to say, or rather to ask is...”

“You want to marry our daughter, is that what you’re trying to say?” Anakin asked calmly.

Han sighed. “Yes sir, that’s it exactly,” he said. “Well? What do you say? I promise I’ll be good to her; no more gambling, or drinking... I swear it. She’s a princess and I’ll treat her like one, you have my word.”

Anakin looked at Padmé, who was smiling. “Then I suppose you have our blessing,” he said at last.

Han nearly doubled over with relief. “Oh, thank you sir, thank you,” he said, shaking Anakin’s hand furiously.

“Congratulations, Han,” Padmé said, kissing him on the cheek. “I know you’ll make Leia very happy.”

Han finally smiled. “I’ll do my best, m’am.”

Chapter 95

CHAPTER 95

"No Han, higher, hold it higher," Luke urged his friend. "I know you can do this."

Han held the practice saber high above his head. "Like this?" he said.

Luke nodded. "Yeah, that's it," he said. "Now come at me again, only this time move your feet."

Han tried the maneuver, and managed to make contact with Luke's weapon this time.

"Not bad, not bad," Luke said encouragingly.

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Han grumbled as both men stepped back.

Luke laughed. "Well think of it this way," Luke suggested. "One day when your kids are trained as Jedi, you'll be able to keep up with them."

Han snorted. "What makes you think my kids will be Jedi?" he asked. "Don't *I* have a say in it?"

"Not when their grandfather is the Chosen One," Luke replied. "You can't fight genetics, Han."

"Great," Han said. "Come on, let's get back to this."

"I'm really quite surprised that nothing happened, sir," Piett told Anakin as they sat in the palace's office. "Although I was very relieved as well," he added, looking at Padmé who was also present.

"It was too obvious," Anakin said. "I should have known that they wouldn't have taken a chance with so many Jedi present."

Piett nodded. "I suppose that would have stopped them," he replied. "So what now?"

"We can't just sit around waiting for them to attack," Anakin said. "I won't put Padmé through that," he added, looking at his wife. "These people must be stopped." He stopped as he gathered his thoughts. "Piett, I want you to take a team with you to the Rebel command ship," he instructed. "I will alert Reikan that you are coming. I want you to search their personnel files thoroughly, look for any connections to Mon Mothma, no matter how tenuous. I want these people found, and I want these people apprehended."

"Ani, if Firmus shows up at the Rebel command ship, don't you think that would raise a few questions?" Padmé commented. "Won't that jeopardize your plans?"

Anakin considered his wife's words, and then uttered a Hutttese curse. "Of course it would," he grumbled, frustrated with himself for not thinking straight. He rubbed a hand over his chin. "What then?" he asked in exasperation. "How do we find them?"

“Perhaps the Rebel leaders themselves could track them down,” suggested Piett. “They have access to the files, plus they know these people, they know where their allegiances lie. Perhaps it would be best to leave it up to them.”

“Perhaps,” Anakin said, standing up and pacing in the room. “But can we trust them to do the right thing?”

“That depends on what you mean by the right thing,” Piett replied.

Anakin turned and looked at him. “I think you know what I mean, Piett,” he replied. “These are ruthless people; they must be dealt with in a ruthless manner.”

Padmé felt a chill go up her spine at the tone of his voice. “Anakin, I don’t like the sound of this,” she began.

“What would you have me do, Padmé?” he asked in frustration. “Just wait for them to strike? Meanwhile our whole family is living in the fear that something will happen. I won’t stand for it, Padmé. We must be proactive, we must strike first, not allow them to do so.”

“We could still send an investigative team sir,” Piett suggested tentatively. “So long as it is done covertly,” he added.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, of course,” he said. “Let’s do it, then. I will contact Reikan and let him know to expect the team. I want this done as soon as possible, Piett.”

“Of course, sir,” Piett replied. ‘I will see to it personally.’ He stood up to leave. “Oh, one more thing,” he added, turning back to Anakin. “Once found, what do you want done with these people?”

“Bring them to me,” Anakin answered at once. “I will deal with them myself.”

Piett nodded his understanding and then left the room.

Anakin looked back at his wife, who sat without saying a word, a troubled look on her face. He walked over to her and sat down on the desk to face her. “Don’t worry, Padmé,” he said. “We will find them, they will be stopped.”

She nodded. “I know,” she said. “Just promise me something,” she said, standing up and taking his face in her hands.

“Anything,” he replied.

“Promise me your desire for revenge won’t destroy you, Anakin,” she said. “Because you sounded like Darth Vader just now, and it scares me to think that you could become him again.”

Anakin frowned. “That will never happen Padmé,” he told her. “Never!”

She nodded, searching in his eyes for the truth. *I hope not Anakin... I couldn't bear to lose you again.*

“Luke tells me your getting better,” Leia said as she and Han walked through the gardens later that evening. “I’m so glad you decided to give the lightsaber another try.”

Han shrugged. “Well, according to Luke, I don’t have much choice in the matter.”

“Of course you do,” Leia replied. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Something about genetics,” Han said. “I guess he figures our kids will be Jedi, so I’d better learn how to use one of those things.”

Leia smiled. “Well, that’s definitely a possibility. I hope that’s not something you’d have a problem with.”

Han shrugged. “They can do what they want, Leia,” he said. “If they want to be Jedi, then I won’t stop them. Besides, I don’t think your dad would appreciate it if I did.”

“You’re not still intimidated by him are you?” she asked.

“Well, maybe a little,” Han admitted. “He sure made me sweat yesterday when I asked about marrying you. Man! I think he was enjoying seeing me squirm.”

Leia smiled to herself. *I’m sure he did*, she reflected, knowing her father’s sense of humor well. “Well he said yes, didn’t he?” Leia reminded him.

“Yeah,” Han replied.

“So don’t worry about it,” Leia said, slipping her arm around his waist. “You have to know my father; he’s... not exactly typical. But he thinks highly of you, I know that.”

“Well so long as you’re convinced,” he replied.

“I am,” she said. “So stop stewing about this okay?”

“Okay sweetheart,” Han replied. “I’ll do my best.”

Chapter 96

CHAPTER 96

Firmus Piett was becoming frustrated. Doing his utmost to remain professional, he nevertheless was finding the mistrust of the Rebel Alliance extremely exasperating. *They know the potential danger that Mon Mothma's allies represent; so why are they being so uncooperative? Why don't they just give us access to their records and let us find them?*

The reports that he had been receiving all contained the same message, couched of course in diplomatic jargon; they have no leads. Piett refused to believe this. He refused to believe that an organization as well structured as the Rebel Alliance would not know the allegiances of all their members. *They know, they just don't trust us enough to tell us.*

What made the situation worse for Piett was the pressure he was receiving from the emperor. Piett had known the current emperor for many years, had witnessed his remarkable metamorphosis and subsequent redemption; yet he knew that despite all the changes, Anakin Skywalker was not, nor had ever been, a patient man. Particularly when it came to his family.

With the impending birth of his new son, Anakin had spent his time divided between his three main priorities: his family, cleaning up the galaxy, and ensuring that those responsible for the empress' abduction were found and brought to justice. Piett was feeling the pressure mounting as the weeks went by, as the Empire was being systematically dismantled from within by the Skywalker family. Piett knew that the emperor's patience was wearing thin. The stress of reshaping the galaxy was difficult enough; but Skywalker had the added pressure of a new child to occupy his thoughts. Piett knew that things had to happen soon or Anakin would take matters into his own hands, no matter what the consequences.

Coruscant

"That looks beautiful, Leia," Padmé said as Leia modeled a long white gown and headpiece for her.

"You don't think it's too simple?" Leia asked, looking over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror.

Padmé stood up and walked over to her daughter. "No, not at all," she said, adjusting the headpiece for her. "It suits you."

Leia smiled. "I think so too," she replied.

Padmé took Leia's hands in hers. "I wish I could give you my dress," she told her wistfully. "But your father thinks going to Naboo would raise too many questions. He's probably right."

"I understand," Leia replied. "What was it like? It was hard to see any detail in the short holo that Artoo showed us."

“It was pretty simple too, actually,” Padmé remembered. ‘Long lace-edged sleeves, a fitted lace headpiece.’ She smiled as she thought back to that day that seemed so long ago now. “I remember that day like it was yesterday,” she said.

“Were you nervous, Mum?” Leia asked, taking off the headpiece and handing it to her mother.

“Of course,” Padmé replied, taking the headpiece from her and setting it on a nearby table. “We were both so young, and your father was going against his Jedi vows to marry me. We couldn’t tell anyone, not even our families.”

“That must have been difficult,” Leia commented. “I suppose it’s a testament to your love for one another that you were willing to go through all that.”

“I suppose so,” Padmé replied. She looked at Leia. “You’re not nervous about marriage, are you honey?”

Leia shrugged. “Maybe a little,” she replied. “I love Han; I have no doubt that he’s the one I want. It’s just that... well; he’s older than me, and more... experienced.”

Padmé smiled. “I think I understand,” she said.

Leia’s face grew pink. “Do you?” she asked. “Were you... nervous the first time too?”

“Yes I was,” Padmé replied. “We both were. But when two people are in love, things just have a way of...progressing naturally.”

Leia nodded. “I think I understand,” she said.

Padmé took Leia’s face in her hands and smiled at her. “Han loves you, Leia,” she told her. “He respects you. Don’t worry, love. It’s a beautiful thing, Leia; a way of growing closer to your spouse unlike any other. You’ll see, I promise.”

Leia smiled. “Thanks Mum,” she said, hugging Padmé. “I feel better now. I don’t know how I lived so much of my life without you.”

Padmé closed her eyes and hugged her daughter as tightly as her rounded belly would permit. “No, neither do I,” she said softly, growing emotional at Leia’s declaration. “But we are together now, Leia; and nothing will ever separate us again.”

Leia nodded, her throat too constricted to speak for a moment. “I love you, Mum,” she said at last.

“I love you too, Leia,” Padmé replied. She pulled back and looked at her with a smile, wiping the tears from her face. “Look at me; I’m such an emotional mess these days.”

Leia laughed, wiping her own tears. “I know what you mean,” she said. “Come on; give me a hand with this dress. I’m ready for lunch, how about you?”

“Do you even need to ask?” Padmé asked, causing Leia to laugh again.

Panic filled Luke as he searched the room. Finally he saw Leia. She had a young man in her custody, and seemed to be interrogating him. Luke could sense her anger clear from across the room and it unnerved him.

"What's going on?" Padmé asked, looking in the direction that Luke was. "Does Leia have someone with her?"

Luke nodded. "It seems so," he said. "But I highly doubt he is working alone."

"You're right there."

Padmé and Luke turned to see a pair of armed men standing behind them. Before either of them could react, each of them felt the end of a blaster shoved into their backs. "Say one word and you'll both die," one of the men whispered. "And you, Lord Vengeance, try one of your fancy sorcerer's tricks and your mother will die instantly."

Padmé looked up at Luke, the fear plain in her eyes. Luke looked back at her. **Don't worry**, he tried to tell her. **Nothing will happen**

"Now, your majesty, kindly step onto the dais, you have an announcement to make," the second man told them. "It's time the Empire knew the real identity of their emperor."

From across the room, Luke could see his father. He was watching them with a deadly look in his eyes. **He knows**, Luke thought with certainty. **He won't let anything happen to Mother...** Luke searched out the room for his sister, and saw her handing over a man to Han who took him away at blaster point. **Leia, hear me...!**

Leia looked directly at her brother, hearing him clearly. She then turned to her father, and Luke could tell that they were communicating. Luke felt the fury filling them both as they realized what was happening. Anakin looked across at him, telling him silently to stand ready. Luke looked to his sister, unnerved by the look of silent fury in her dark eyes. At that moment, she and their father looked so alike, their auras both bristling with anger, with darkness. She looked back at Anakin, her dark eyes boring into his blue. **Choke him**, Luke heard him tell her. **The one on the right, I'll take the one on the left**

Luke's eyes widened in horror as he realized what she was doing. **No, Father! Don't use the Dark Side!**

Would you rather see your mother shot? Those men will kill her! Don't be a fool, Luke! Only the Dark Side can save her now...

Within seconds the two assailants were dead, and when Luke looked up again, both his sister and his father were looking at him. Their eyes were Sith yellow.

Luke sat up, gasping for breath. He was bathed in sweat, breathing hard from the terror of his dream. *It was only a dream*, he told himself, trying to use the Force to calm himself. He ran his trembling hands through his sweat soaked hair, forcing the images from his mind. *The Dark Side will not win*, he told himself. *It will not take my father from me again... it will not take my sister from me... so long as I live, I won't let it triumph.*

Chapter 97

CHAPTER 98

Imperial Royal Cruiser

"So when are you going to tell me what is bothering you?"

Luke looked at his father, surprised by the question.

"What makes you think something is?" he asked.

"Come on Luke, do you really need to ask me that?" Anakin replied. "You haven't been yourself since we left Coruscant three weeks ago."

Luke shrugged. "I guess not," he said with a sigh. "I haven't been sleeping well lately," he said at last.

Anakin frowned. "Bad dreams," he said, not as a question but rather as a statement of fact.

Luke nodded. "How did you know?"

"Just a hunch," Anakin replied. 'I've had a few myself over the years,' he added. "What are they about?"

"Leia," Luke replied. "Mainly."

Anakin nodded. "You have reservations about her marrying Solo?" he asked.

"Oh no, not at all," Luke replied at once. "Han is a great guy, he's perfect for her. You don't have reservations of your own, do you Dad?"

Anakin was thoughtful for a moment before responding. "Not exactly," he said at last. "I suppose every father has mixed feelings when his only daughter gets married. I have nothing against Solo, though I sense he is rather uneasy around me."

Luke grinned. "No kidding," he replied. "You're the only person I know who can make him jumpy."

Anakin smiled. "Good, that will keep him in line," he commented.

Luke laughed out loud at his father's comment, and for a moment was able to put aside the troubling visions he'd been having recently.

"So if it's not about her wedding, what is it then?" Anakin asked, not about to let it go.

Luke looked down at his hands folded in his lap. "I've had dreams about her using the Dark Side," he said at last.

Anakin was alarmed by his son's words. "Do you think they are visions? Or merely fears manifesting themselves?"

"I don't know," Luke admitted. "I wish I did. But it's not just Leia I've dreamed of Dad; it's you too."

Anakin frowned. "Me?? You've dreamed of me turning back to the Dark Side?"

Luke nodded. "Yes, more than once."

Anakin ran a hand through his hair, disturbed by his son's revelation. "Do you have doubts about me, Luke?" he asked pointedly.

"On a conscious level, no," Luke responded. "But on a subconscious level....maybe I do. I don't know, Dad. I only know that I've had the same dream or versions of it four times since we left Coruscant."

"I can promise you Luke that I have renounced the Dark Side," Anakin averred. "You needn't worry about that."

"I know that, Dad, and I believe you," Luke replied earnestly. "I believe *in* you. I don't understand why this dream keeps recurring."

"Obi-Wan used to tell me that dreams pass in time," Anakin reflected. "I think perhaps he was right; sometimes dreams are just dreams, and they don't mean anything at all. The mind gets in a rut and projects images into our dreams that we might not be consciously thinking about."

Luke nodded. "Let's hope that's all it is," he said. "I can't think of the alternative; I won't think of it."

"No, neither can I," Anakin replied. While he had no doubts about his own ability to resist the lure of the Darkness, he was not so certain about Leia. The sight of her eyes turned Sith yellow had haunted him for months.

"Excuse me your majesty; Admiral Piett has arrived," an aide announced as he entered the room.

"Good," Anakin said. "Show him in."

"Maybe he has good news," Luke commented.

"We can only hope," Anakin replied, concerned that Piett's reports had become sporadic lately. *That can't be good news*, he reflected as he waited for Piett to appear.

Coruscant

"Did you see that?" Leia asked in astonishment. "He waved to me!"

Padmé laughed, looking up at the holographic image protected above her. "I don't think he was actually waving, Leia," she said.

"Well it looked like it to me," Leia said, smiling at her mother. "He knows how much his big sister is going to spoil him."

"Oh no, not you too," Padmé said with a shake of her head. "Your father is going to be out of control, I just know it."

Leia laughed. "Well you know he and I are so much alike," she said. "You'll have both of us to contend with I think. Not to mention Luke."

"Oh boy," Padmé said as she allowed the droid to help her up into a sitting position. "This baby will be so spoiled."

"He looks wonderful, Padmé," the physician told her. "He looks pretty big for his age though; are you sure about your dates?"

"I believe so," Padmé said as Leia helped her off the examination table. "Why, do you think I'm further along?"

"Could be," the physician replied, studying the data the computer had gathered on the status of the fetus. "Let me see here," she said reading over the information.

"It looks to me like he's about four weeks older than we thought," the physician announced at last. "I hope you have your nursery ready, Padmé."

Padmé looked at Leia. "I guess that's our next project then," Leia said.

Padmé nodded with a smile. "Yes, I guess so. At least we know what color to decorate it with."

"That's true," Leia said as she helped Padmé on with her cloak. "So two more months? Is that what you're telling us?"

"Yes, about then," the physician replied. 'But your mother tells me that you and your twin brother were a few weeks early,' she pointed out. "So this baby could be as well."

Padmé nodded her understanding. "Thank you doctor," she said. "I'll see you in a month's time."

"Dad will be even more nervous when he hears this," Leia commented as they left the doctor's office. "Is he still coming home today?"

Padmé shook her head. "No, not until the day after tomorrow," she replied. "He had a meeting with Firmus today. I wonder how that went."

"Hopefully he's found out the whereabouts of that woman who abducted you," Leia commented as she opened the speeder door for her mother. "I'll start looking for her myself if he hasn't."

Padmé climbed into the speeder, something that was becoming more and more difficult with each passing week. "I'm sure Firmus will have this mess straightened out soon, if he hasn't already," she said. "He's very efficient."

Leia nodded. "I hope you're right, Mum," she said. "The last thing we need is this hanging over your head with Anakin's birth around the corner."

Padmé nodded, the thought of that ruthless woman unnerving her and ruining her happy mood. "Take me home, Leia," she said, suddenly feeling very tired. "I want to go home."

Imperial Royal Cruiser

"You haven't any leads, is that what you're telling us Piett?" Anakin asked, fighting to keep the anger out of his voice.

"I'm afraid so, sir," Piett replied miserably. "The Rebel leaders are not being terribly helpful I'm afraid."

Anakin frowned. "The fools," he muttered, shaking his head. "When are they going to trust me?? I thought that after that disaster with Mon Mothma that we had reached an understanding with these people. Obviously I was wrong."

"Sir, if I may make a suggestion," Piett began tentatively.

"What is it?" Anakin asked.

"Perhaps one of your own children may have better luck unraveling this mystery," he suggested. "There is a history there, after all; and both Luke and Leia are far more familiar with the rebel protocol than any of my men."

"That's a great idea," Luke said. "What do you think, Dad?"

Anakin considered this for a moment. "I suppose that would make sense," he conceded at last.

"Perhaps both of them together would work even better than one alone," Piett put in. "Two Skywalkers working together — quite an indomitable force, if you'll excuse the expression."

Anakin had to smile. "You always did have a way with words, Piett." He looked at his son. "What do you think, Luke?"

"I'm all for it," he said. "But will you be able to convince Leia to leave Mother?"

"Yes, because I'll be staying with her," Anakin replied.

"That would do it," Luke agreed with a smile.

"Perfect," Piett commented. "Shall I contact General Reikan and inform him of our plan?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, do so at once, Piett. I want this situation cleaned up as soon as possible; it's gone on far too long as it is. I won't have this hanging over our heads any longer, not with a new baby and a wedding coming up."

Piett nodded. "Yes, I completely understand, sir. I will contact him at once."

Anakin watched him leave, the frown not leaving his face. *This had better work, Piett, or I will search for them myself. And I will stop at nothing until they are found.* Then he too left the room, without another word to his son.

Luke watched his father, hearing the ominous vow he had made, and the images from his dream sprang to mind. *You promised me, Father, you promised all of us... don't let vengeance destroy you all over again. This family won't survive if we lose you now.*

Chapter 98

Chapter 99

Coruscant-Imperial Palace

Padmé woke up for the third time in the dead of night. She had forgotten how difficult it was to sleep during the final trimester of pregnancy. Between the baby kicking, joint pains and the frequent visits to the fresher, she was having a hard time getting much sleep at all. On top of all that was the constant worry that occupied her mind now, the fear that she was being watched, that someone out there was just waiting for a chance to strike.

Padmé reached her hand over to the side of the bed where Anakin normally slept, missing him desperately. She felt tears well up in her eyes as the frustration and fatigue overcame her. *I miss you Ani!* She thought miserably as her tears fell onto the pillow. *Hurry home.*

Imperial Royal Cruiser

Padmé was not the only one unable to sleep. Anakin too was having difficulties. He stood at the large view window, arms folded over his chest, deep in thought. *Padmé is troubled.* He could feel her distress even from across the vast expanse of space between them. It frustrated him that the situation had not been resolved, and that her abductors were still at large. *I didn't want this for us, Angel,* he thought grimly. *I wanted this pregnancy to be a beautiful time for you, not marred with worry and stress...* Was there every going to be a time that was not stressful though? Does being the Chosen One preclude the possibility of a normal life? *That's all I want right now,* he thought, *to live a quiet life, to watch my son grow up, to grow old with my wife... I just want this farce to be over.*

"Excuse me sir, but we're preparing for reversion," a clone informed him.

Anakin turned to the masked soldier. "Good," he replied. "Have my shuttle ready as soon as we reach orbit around Coruscant."

"Of course, your majesty."

The clone left, passing Luke on his way out the door.

"We're almost home," Luke said as he joined his father.

Anakin nodded, deep in thought.

"Something wrong?" Luke asked.

Anakin sighed. "I'm just tired of playing emperor, Luke," he replied. "I'm tired of the façade, tired of the game. I miss your mother, and I feel like I should be with her right now."

"You will be," Luke reminded his father.

"I know, Luke," Anakin replied, running his hands through his hair. "I'm just tired, that's all. And I guess, well, I've been questioning the decisions I've made. I'm wondering if all of this has been for nothing."

Luke frowned. "Why would you think that? You have made a tremendous difference already in the short time you've been emperor. Many systems are infinitely better off now than they were under that tyrant Palpatine."

"I know," Anakin acknowledged. "I suppose this situation with the Rebel Alliance has me frustrated. How can I ever hope for there to be peace in the galaxy when so much mistrust still exists between the Empire and the Alliance? I'm wondering if maybe I've just been deluding myself to think that I could ever put an end to the conflict."

Luke had not seen his father so down on himself in a long time, not since the days shortly after his rebirth.

"Listen to me," Luke said at last. "You can't be so harsh on yourself, Dad. Yes, things are a little strained still between the Empire and the Alliance; but think of the history. The two factions have been in conflict for twenty years! That kind of enmity doesn't just go away over night. It will take time for trust to be built, but it will happen. You have done so much to pave the way, Dad. Don't ever discount how much you have done, or the value of it."

Anakin looked at his son, proud of his maturity and wisdom. "Thank you Luke," he said. "I'm grateful to have your support."

"You always will," Luke replied. "No matter what, you will always have me on your side."

Anakin smiled and put a hand on Luke's shoulder. "You make me very proud, Luke," he told him, pulling him close to give him a hug. "I love you, son."

Luke embraced his father tightly. "I love you too, Dad."

Coruscant-Imperial Palace.

"Is there anything I can get for you, milady?"

"No Threepio," Padmé replied. "Thank you."

"And you, Princess?" the droid asked of Leia.

"No, thanks Threepio," Leia replied.

The protocol droid shuffled out of the room, leaving Padmé and her daughter to pore over the designs presented to them by the designer they had engaged to decorate the nursery.

"I like this one," Leia said, pointing to a drawing of a mountain meadow with blue sky overhead. "It reminds me of the room I had as a child."

Padmé nodded, the thought that she had missed her daughter's entire childhood threatening to make her weepy. Resolutely she pushed the painful thought from her mind.

"I like this one," she said, pointing to a picture depicting a waterfall. 'It looks like Naboo, a special place there. I wanted to have you and Luke there, actually,' she added. "It's so beautiful there, so peaceful."

Leia looked away from the picture to look at her mother. She had sensed that her mood had been melancholy of late, and it concerned her. "I like it too," she said at last. "Let's go with this one."

Padmé nodded, picking up the picture and looking at it closely. Memories from years ago, from a different lifetime, assaulted her as she stared at the familiar image, and for a moment she could almost feel the spray of the waterfall and hear its roar as it tumbled to the lake below.

“Mum, you okay?” Leia asked.

Padmé tore her eyes from the picture to look at Leia. “I’m okay,” she replied to look at Leia. ‘Just tired,’ she added. “And missing your father.”

Leia smiled. “He’s coming home, Mum,” she reminded her. “He’ll be here soon.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she replied. “Don’t mind me, Leia. It’s just hormones.”

Leia took the picture from her mother’s hands and set it down on the desk.

“Come on,” Leia said. “Let’s go for a walk. It’s a gorgeous day, and the gardens are just what you need right now to lift your spirits.”

Padmé smiled. “Thank you, Leia,” she replied taking her daughter’s hand. “That’s a great idea.”

“Mum, what would you think if Han and I got married before the baby is born?” Leia asked as she and Padmé sat down in the gazebo.

Padmé looked at her, surprised. “But the baby is due in two months, Leia. Can you get everything ready by then?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Leia replied. “Neither of us wants something big or splashy; I just think it would be easier for you if you didn’t have a little one to worry about.”

Padmé smiled. “Leia, I don’t want you to rearrange your life because of this baby,” she said. “You have the wedding when you want, it’s your decision.”

“I know that,” Leia said. “I guess Han and I are just... anxious to get married.”

“Ah,” Padmé said. “I think I understand. Well in that case, you get married whenever you wish. If you can get things ready before little Ani comes, then by all means, do it. I will help you in any way I can.”

“Thanks Mum,” Leia said.

“You know your father and I had only two witnesses at our wedding,” Padmé told her. ‘Artoo and Threepio. It was rather an impromptu, subdued affair,’ she remembered with a smile. “But beautiful all the same.”

“Well, that’s all Han and I want, really,” Leia said. “We don’t care about having something fancy. All that matters is that we are married.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that’s true,” she said. “Why don’t we just have it here out here on the terrace, then? You’ll have all the flowers you need already set up.”

“That’s a great idea,” Leia said, looking around. “It’s perfect out here!”

Padmé looked around, the irony not lost on her. *Anakin had this garden made as a memorial to me, and now it will host our daughter’s wedding... life is so capricious.*

“Why don’t you go and tell Han about our idea?” Padmé suggested, sending that Leia was very eager to do so. “I’m sure you two have a lot to talk about.”

Leia smiled. “You sure? I don’t want to leave you alone if you’re feeling down.”

Padmé shook her head. “I’m fine, Leia, really. You go on; I’ll just sit a while longer and enjoy the fragrances out here.”

“Okay,” Leia said, standing up. She bent down and kissed her mother. “Thanks Mum, love you.”

“I love you too, Leia,” Padmé said, and then watched as Leia hurried down the pathway back towards the palace.

Upon reaching the great hall, Leia met her father and brother who had just arrived home.

“Dad! Luke!” she exclaimed, hugging them both. “When did you get home?”

“Just moments ago,” Anakin replied. “Where is your mother?”

“She’s in the gazebo,” Leia said, pointing outside. “She’s been kind of blue lately, Dad. I’m glad you’re home.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, me too,” he said. “I’ll go see her now.”

He left his two children and headed outside onto the terrace. The sun was starting its descent into the azure Coruscant sky as Anakin bounded down the stone staircase on his way to see his angel. He saw her at the end of the pathway, walking amid the summer blooms. She stood with her back to him, and didn’t hear him until he was almost upon her. When she heard his boots upon the gravel path she turned, half expecting to see Leia again.

“Ani!” she exclaimed when she saw him. He rushed over to her and wrapped his arms around her, realizing all at once how much he had missed her.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” she said, pressing her face to his warm, broad chest.

Anakin stroked her hair gently. “I’m glad to be here,” he told her. “And I’m not leaving again, Padmé. I’m home to stay.”

Padmé looked up at him. “What did you say?”

Anakin smiled. “You heard me, Padmé; I’m not leaving again. I’m home to stay.”

“But... but what about your mission?” she asked. “What about the Empire?”

“The Empire can wait,” he said, stroking her face. ‘Right now my priorities are right here,’ he said. “You and our baby are more important than anything, Padmé, and I mean to be here with you to see you through this pregnancy.”

Padmé felt her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Ani,” she said softly. “You don’t know what it means to me to hear you say that,” she told him.

“I think I do,” he said, kissing her softly. ‘I’ve missed you, Padmé,’ he said, holding her close again. “I’m just not right when I’m away from you.”

"I'm miserable without you, Ani," she told him, letting all the frustration of the past few weeks out. "I don't sleep, I'm so moody... I'm too old to be going through this again, Anakin."

Anakin laughed. "Well I'm here now to do whatever I can to make these last three months easier for you, Padmé."

"Two months, Ani," she said, looking up at him. "I went to the doctor the other day— I had the dates wrong. The baby is due in two months, not three."

Anakin's eyes widened. "Two months?" he asked. "Is that all?"

Padmé nodded with a smile. "Yes, and Leia tells me now that she and Han want to get married before he's born."

"Looks like we'll have our hands full around here then, doesn't it?" he said.

"Yes, we certainly will," she said, snuggling against him again. "I'm just so glad you're home," she sighed, closing her eyes and basking in his love and his strong, protective aura.

"I'm glad too," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Home is where I belong now, Padmé."

Chapter 99

“Are you sure about this, Mum? I don’t want to put any more stress on you.”

“It’s no stress at all, Leia,” Padmé replied as they walked down the stairs together. “Really. You’ve already done the hard part— the planning. Now all that needs to be done is the ordering. I can do that; I want to do it, Leia. It will be good to have something to occupy my mind.”

“Luke and I won’t be gone long,” Leia assured her mother. “I’m certain of that. I already have my suspicions who were involved with your abduction; it won’t take long to end this.”

“I hope not,” Padmé said, linking her arm through Leia’s. “I’m going to miss you, Leia. I’ve become quite accustomed to having you around.”

Leia smiled. “I will miss you too, Mum,” she said. “But it won’t be long until we’re back, I’m sure of it.”

Padmé smiled, hoping that her daughter was right.

“Good morning,” Padmé said as she and Leia entered the breakfast room where the men of the household were already seated. They stood up to greet Leia and Padmé.

“Good morning,” Anakin said, holding out a chair for his wife.

“Thank you,” Padmé said as Anakin kissed her cheek.

“Everything is all set,” Luke told his parents. “General Reikan is expecting us.”

Anakin nodded as he took his seat again. “Let’s hope that this is the solution,” he said. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense.”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Leia said as she poured herself some juice. “We’ll find them. What shall we do with them when we do?”

Anakin considered her question before responding. The Jedi part of him felt compelled to give them a chance to defend their actions; but the fiercely protective part of him wanted nothing more than to avenge his wife, to see them pay for the way they had treated her, for the danger they had placed her life and the life of their unborn son in.

“Arrest them,” Anakin said at last. “They will stand trial for their crimes, I will see to it.”

Luke nodded. “Yes, that is the best way to handle this, considering we are still hoping to reach a peace treaty with the Alliance. Any effort to show mercy will go a long way.”

“Even if they don’t deserve mercy?” Leia commented.

Luke and Anakin exchanged a look. “Yes, even if they don’t deserve it,” Luke said, his sister’s words upsetting him.

Leia said no more, and the family continued to eat their breakfast without further discussion on the subject.

"It will be strange not having you with me, Luke," Anakin said as the household droids loaded the ship

Luke smiled. "I know, I feel the same way," he told his father. "But I think Leia is right; I don't think this will take long."

Anakin nodded. "Your Jedi senses will go a long way to finding them, I'm sure."

"I'm sure too," Luke replied. "Plus Han and Chewie are very helpful at...infiltrating computer databanks."

Anakin laughed. "Yes, I'm sure their skills are going to come in quite handy."

Luke smiled. "I'll miss you, Dad," he said, realizing for the first time just how accustomed he had become to his father's company.

"I'll miss you too, son," Anakin replied, putting his hand on Luke's shoulders. "I have every confidence that you will be successful."

Luke nodded, hoping that his father was right. His father's opinion meant a great deal to him. The thought of letting him down troubled him greatly.

"Time to go," Han announced as he and Chewbacca appeared. They were followed shortly afterward by Leia and Padmé.

"I guess this is goodbye for now," Padmé said, looking at her children, trying not to cry.

"Goodbye Mum," Leia said, hugging her mother warmly. "We'll be in touch, I promise."

Padmé nodded, fighting to maintain her composure. Luke embraced his mother next.

"We'll be home soon, Mother," he said. "I promise you we'll find out who is responsible and arrest them in no time."

"I know you will, Luke" Padmé said.

"Take care of your brother," Anakin told Leia as he hugged her tightly.

"I will," Leia said, hugging Anakin back.

"Take care of your sister," Anakin told Luke next.

"I promise I will," Luke said.

"We're expected within twenty-four hours, so we'd better get going," Han announced.

"Have a safe journey," Padmé said to them. "We'll be waiting to hear from you."

"May the Force be with you all," Anakin added.

Anakin took his wife's hand, sensing her sadness at the departure of their children. Together they watched as the foursome boarded the Millennium Falcon and take off from the landing platform.

"Come on," Anakin said. "Let's go back inside."

"So what do you think?" Padmé asked as they stood inside the nursery looking at the progress the decorators had made.

Anakin looked around at the familiar scene being recreated before him. "Reminds me of someplace," he said. "I can't quite put my finger on it though," he teased her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Is that so?"

Anakin nodded. "Looks like you're homesick," he commented.

Padmé sighed. "Yes, I am," she admitted. "It's been so long since I've been home, Ani. I would give anything to go there again. I don't even know if my parents are still alive," she added quietly.

Anakin put his hands on her shoulders. "We'll get there soon, Padmé," he told her. "I promise. This farce will be over soon, and then we will be free to go wherever we wish."

"I hope so," she said. "I..." she stopped as she felt a strong kick within her. She looked up at him with a smile. "Seems I'm not the only one who wants to go home," she said, taking his hand and putting it on the side of her round belly.

Anakin smiled when he felt his son kicking strongly against his hand. "Wow," he said. "That's quite a kick. That doesn't hurt does it?"

Padmé shook her head. "Not usually," she replied. "Sometimes he likes to use my internal organs as a trampoline, but other than that, it doesn't hurt. It feels pretty amazing, actually." "I'm sure," he said, looking down at the round belly of his wife. "I can't wait to see him," he said. "How many weeks?"

"Eight or so," she replied. "Not long now."

"No, not at all. Is this wedding going to happen before he's born?"

"That's the plan," Padmé said walking over to the rocking chair and sitting down. "Leia has everything so well organized I'm sure it will."

Anakin nodded. "I guess she gets that from you," he commented.

"What is that?" Padmé asked, looking up at him.

"Being organized," he replied. "I've never been terribly organized myself," he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "No, you?" she teased.

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's true," he said with a smile. "I wonder how they're doing," he said.

"They've only been gone twenty-four hours, Ani," she reminded him.

"I know," he replied. "But if I know them, they'll have already stirred things up considerably."

She smiled. "You miss them too, don't you?"

Anakin nodded. "Am I that transparent?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," she replied. "But that's alright, that's one of the many things I love about you."

“That I’m transparent?” he teased.

“No, that you aren’t afraid to show your feelings,” she replied. “A lot of men think it’s a sign of weakness to do so.”

Anakin smiled. “Well, I suppose I’m not like a lot of men.”

“No, in most respects you are not,” she told him, holding her hand out to him. ‘Help me up,’ she asked. “It’s time for lunch.”

“Already?” he teased as he helped her out of the chair.

Padmé laughed. “Yes, already. Now come on, baby is hungry.”

Chapter 100

CHAPTER 100

"So what have you learned?" Anakin asked as he sat in communication with Luke and Leia.

"We have found the names of three individuals," Luke reported. "Two men and a woman."

"Good work," Anakin replied. "Who are they? Where are they?"

Luke and Leia looked at one another. "Well, that's the problem. We don't know where they are, Dad," Luke replied. "No one can tell us where they might be; in fact no one has seen any of them in months."

Anakin frowned at this piece of news, though he was not really surprised. These people had made enemies with the galactic emperor; they would undoubtedly be making themselves scarce.

"So you at least have an image, a holograph, anything to let us know what they look like," Anakin asked his children.

"Yes, we have managed to get our hands on their personnel files," Leia informed him. "I'll transmit the data right now."

Anakin waited as Leia sent the information. Upon receiving it, he studied the information, and then looked at the images of the three renegades. *Of course they could look completely different now*, he reflected with frustration. *And probably do. How the hell do I find them if no one knows where they are or what they look like??*

"So any of them look familiar to you, Dad?" Luke said.

Anakin kept returning to one of the photos, something in the man's face vaguely familiar. "Maybe," he replied at last. "One of them looks somewhat familiar, though I can't place him."

"Threepio was with Mother when she was abducted," Leia remembered. "Maybe he can verify the identity of the person who did it."

"That's a good idea," Anakin replied. "I'll get him to examine these images at once," he told them as he continued to study the image. *Where have I seen this face before?? There is something in his eyes, something that I have seen recently... but where??*

"Dad? What is it?" Luke asked, seeing the pensive look on his father's face.

"I don't know, Luke," Anakin replied. "But I think I've seen this man," he said, indicating the screen. "This....Valenquiss Kain. I can't be sure, but I seem to think that he has been in this palace. I know that doesn't seem right, but I can't shake the feeling."

Luke and Leia knew that when their father had a feeling about something, he was usually right. "Why don't you check the security videos?" Leia suggested. "At least for the past

several weeks, perhaps since your birthday party.”

“That’s it!” Anakin exclaimed. “That’s where I saw him! It was at the party!”

Luke nodded. “We were all expecting them to do something that night, remember?” he remarked. “Maybe they got cold feet when they saw all the security.”

“Not to mention you, Master Yoda and Dad,” Leia asked. “This could be the break we need, Dad,” she said, turning back to Anakin. “If you can verify your hunch using the video holos, then we at least have a lead.”

Anakin nodded thoughtfully. “I will get Threepio to analyze them,” he said, realizing that the droid would be able to view the holos much more quickly than he himself could. “As well as getting him to identify your mother’s abductors. We’re onto something, kids,” he said. “I can feel it.”

Luke smiled. “I feel it too, Dad,” he said. “What do you want us to do next?”

“Come home,” Anakin replied. “You’ve done well to find this information, but now I need you both here to help me put it all together. Besides, Leia’s big day is coming up in a few weeks,” he added, looking at Leia with a smile. “I think she needs to be here to finalize a few things.”

Leia smiled. “Yes, that’s true,” she said. “It will be nice to come home. We’ve missed you and Mum. How is she doing?”

“She’s putting on a brave face, but I know she’s worried,” Anakin replied. “She’s not herself — not sleeping well, preoccupied; and I don’t think it’s just the baby.”

“We’ll soon put an end to all this Dad,” Luke assured him. “I know it.”

Anakin nodded. “I hope so, son. I’m going to get started on this surveillance holos. I’ll see you soon.”

“We’ll be home tomorrow,” Leia replied. “See you then, Dad.”

Anakin turned off the screen and sat for a moment in contemplation. *This is it... I can feel it. These people don’t know who they’re dealing with if they think we won’t track them down like the vermin that they are...* He stood up and left the office in search of See Threepio, determined to solve this mystery once and for all.

Padmé woke up in the middle of the night, as she always did, to find that Anakin had still not come up to bed. She turned over and looked at the chrono on the nightstand to see that it was past 3. Pushing back the covers, she rolled onto her side and got out of bed. Finding her robe, she put it on and headed downstairs.

“You’re sure about this, Threepio?” Anakin said.

“Oh yes sir,” Threepio replied. “Most definitely.”

Anakin nodded, staring at the holo clip that was frozen on the screen. It showed a man disguised as a dignitary from Corellia, but the eyes were unmistakable. *That is him*, he thought. Threepio had already verified that the woman whose data Leia had transmitted was indeed the woman who had brought he and Artoo Detoo to Coruscant, and the one who had subsequently abducted Padmé. *Had she also been present that night? Had they planned to*

make their move that night? Leia's theory was a sound one; no doubt they had thought better of their plans when they realized how well guarded the empress was. They were clever, they were devious, Anakin reflected. *I will not underestimate them again.*

"Check for her now," Anakin told the droid. "This... Tyria Roye. If he was here, then it's possible she was too. Search the holos for her now," he ordered. He stood up to stretch, feeling his back starting to ache from sitting for so long. The tension made a dull ache between his shoulder blades, and he left the study to take a walk.

"Ani, what are you doing up at this hour?" Padmé said from the foot of the stairs when she saw him emerge from the study.

Anakin looked up at her. "I could ask you the same thing," he replied with a smile.

"I'm up at this hour every night, you know that," she countered, walking over to him. "What are you doing?"

Anakin put his hands on her shoulders. "I think we may have a lead, Padmé," he told her.

Padmé's eyes widened at once. "Really??" she said. "What makes you think so?"

So Anakin proceeded to relate to her all that he had learned from Luke and Leia, and the progress that he and Threepio had made thus far with the security holos.

"So you think they were here the night of your party?" Padmé said after he had concluded. "Why didn't they do anything?"

"Too much security," Anakin replied. "No doubt they realized they'd be nailed if they so much as looked at you the wrong way."

"So now what?" Padmé asked. "How does this get us any closer to finding them?"

"I have a theory," Anakin said. "But I need Threepio to find me the last few pieces of information before I can put it all together."

Padmé nodded her understanding. "I hope you're right, Ani," she said. "I don't want this worry hanging over us during Leia's wedding," she said. "It's coming up in only 4 weeks time."

"I know," Anakin replied. "Don't worry angel, we'll get them."

"Come up to bed, Ani," she said, putting her hand to his face. "You look exhausted."

"I am," he admitted. "But I want to..."

"Master Ani, I found her!" Threepio exclaimed excitedly coming out of the study.

Anakin looked at Padmé. "I think this is what I've been waiting for," he said. He and Padmé followed Threepio back into the study.

"There she is, sir," Threepio said. "I'm certain of it."

Anakin and Padmé looked closely at the screen where the image of a young woman was frozen. Padmé started with alarm when she saw her. "That's her," she said, her eyes riveted to the screen. "I'd know those eyes anywhere."

Anakin looked at his wife. “The one who abducted you,” he said.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied. “And she was here the night of your party,” she said, looking up at him.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he said. “She’s Tyria Royle, also known as Aliri Royle,” he said, recalling the information.

“So what is your theory?” she asked.

“One moment,” he said, holding up a finger. He turned to Threepio. Picking up a datapad he wrote down an order. The droid looked at the words, and left the room at once.

“Anakin, what...”

“Padmé, just wait,” he said.

Momentarily Threepio returned with Artoo Detoo, who commenced a scan of the room. After a few moments, the astromech whistled and beeped his report.

“The room is clear, sir,” Threepio announced.

“Good,” Anakin replied, and then turned to his wife. ‘Considering that they did not do anything when they were here, it is logical to assume that they planted a listening device somewhere in the palace,’ Anakin told her. “This room is clear, Artoo just ran a scan. I will have him check the rest of the palace, for I’m certain there is one here, perhaps more than one.”

Padmé looked up at him, a chill running down her spine. “You mean they have been listening to us since that night?” she asked in horror. “That they know everything that goes on in our home?”

Anakin nodded. “I think so,” he replied. “And if so, they know about the wedding.”

Padmé frowned. “And that’s when they’ll strike then,” she said quietly. “That’s what they’re waiting for.”

“I think so,” Anakin replied.

“We can’t let them ruin Leia’s day,” Padmé said. “You have to stop them before they get the chance to do.”

Anakin nodded. “We’ll stop them, Padmé,” he told her. “I promise you.”

Padmé nodded, her eyes riveted to the image on the screen. “I hope so, Ani,” she said softly. “I hope so.”

Chapter 101

CHAPTER 101

Luke, Leia, Han and Chewbacca arrived back at Coruscant two days later. During those two days, the palace had been searched thoroughly for listening devices, recording devices, spy hardware of any kind. The search had yielded more than a dozen devices, situated in many areas of the main floor of the palace. The second and third floors had been heavily guarded on the night of the party, as well as the office; so no devices had been found there.

"You realize that they have heard every detail of this wedding?" Leia asked as she and Han sat with Anakin on the terrace. "They know everything— who's coming, the date, even who's providing the music!"

"I know," Anakin replied with a frown. "If only we had known the identities of the abductor sooner, we could have prevented that. But of course that didn't happen."

"Well the place is going to be heavily guarded again," Han reminded them. "They won't be able to do anything, even if they do know all the details. So what? They so much as breathe heavy in Padmé's direction the guards will be all over them."

"They will if they value their lives," Anakin muttered.

"Relax, Anakin," Han said. "This is supposed to be a happy occasion. We can't let this ruin it."

"Han is right," Leia replied. "I won't let them ruin my wedding day, Dad. If they didn't do anything at your party, then they won't do anything tomorrow at the wedding."

Anakin sighed. "I hope you're right, Leia," he said, unable to shake the uneasy feeling he had.

Leia smiled and put her hand on her father's. "Trust me," she said.

Anakin had to smile. "Very well," he said. "But I'm keeping the extra detail of clones; don't even think about talking me out of that."

"We wouldn't dream of it, would we Han?" Leia said.

Han shook his head. "Not a chance," he said. "Not if it gives you and Padmé peace of mind."

"It does," Anakin replied. He looked at Leia. "I can't believe my little girl is getting married tomorrow," he said with a smile.

Leia shrugged. "Well, I'm hardly a little girl any more, Dad," she said.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I know that," he replied, feeling a sudden pang of sadness that he had not known her when she was a little girl. *She was probably a regular little spit fire*, he thought with amusement. "But you will always be my little girl, Leia, no matter how old you are."

Leia felt her throat constrict. "Dad, don't do this," she chided him. "Don't make me cry," she said, swatting him good naturedly with her hand.

"Okay, okay," he said, grabbing her hand and kissing it. "I'll save the sentiment for tomorrow," he added with a wink.

Leia laughed, even as the tears pricked at her eyes. "Oh, great," she replied. She stood up and kissed her father on the cheek. 'I need to get to bed,' she said. "Big day tomorrow."

Anakin looked up at her and nodded. "Yes, it is indeed," he agreed. "I suppose we should all think about getting some rest. Your mother has been asleep for over an hour now."

"Well she's sleeping for two," Leia reminded him.

Anakin smiled. "Well, unfortunately she's not sleeping much at all these days," he told them. "Your little brother is quite active at night. I've been booted in the back more than once."

Han laughed. "Not even born and he's already disrespectful," he quipped as they walked inside. "Kids these days."

Anakin nodded. "Indeed. Well, sleep well, both of you. Tomorrow is the start of a whole new life for you both."

Leia and Han looked at one another with a smile. "I can't wait for that life to begin," Han said, taking her hand.

Leia smiled. "No, neither can I."

Padmé was asleep when Anakin slipped into bed beside her. She had nearly every pillow on the bed surrounding her as she slept on her side. There was one supporting her belly, one behind her back, one between her knees to ease the pressure on her hips; Anakin had become accustomed to sleeping without a pillow in these last few weeks of his wife's pregnancy.

Snuggling up behind her, he put his arm around her, with his hand resting on her round belly. He stroked it gently, sensing that his small namesake was asleep. *Now maybe Padmé will get some rest*, he thought as he closed his eyes.

Luke woke up early the next morning. Not being one to loll in bed, he got up and walked over to the window to check the weather. It was a clear, sunny day, and in the gardens below Luke could see the servants making preparations for the big event. He smiled when he saw Han wandering through the gardens, and Luke could sense his friend's nervousness clearly. Getting dressed quickly, Luke made his way downstairs and outside to join Han.

"Morning Han," Luke said as he reached his friend.

Han turned to see Luke. "Oh, hey kid," he said. "You're up early."

Luke smiled. "So are you," he remarked. "Couldn't sleep?"

Han shook his head. "Nah, not too well," he said. "Guess I'm a bit nervous."

No kidding, Luke thought in amusement. "You're not getting cold feet, are you Han?" he asked.

"No, of course not," Han averred. "I'm crazy about Leia. I guess being a bachelor for so long... well, it's kind of a big change, you know?"

"I'm sure," Luke replied. "But you guys are perfect for each other, I know you'll have a great marriage."

"You mean between fights?" Han asked with a grin.

Luke laughed. "Yeah, but what's life without a few fireworks?"

Han nodded. "I guess you're right, kid. So when can I expect to be invited to your wedding?" he asked.

Luke raised his eyebrows. "Me? What makes you think I'll ever get married?"

"Well, let's see, your parents broke all the rules to get married, in secret no less, your sister's getting married; so what's stopping you?" Han asked pointedly.

"Just a minor detail," Luke replied. "Namely, a woman."

Han laughed. "Well, you need to make the time to find one, kid. One of these days you'll meet some girl that will just knock your Jedi approved socks off."

Luke laughed. "Well, maybe so," he said. "But I'm not holding my breath. Besides, this is your day, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Han replied wryly.

"Come on," Luke said, putting an arm around his friend's shoulders. "As best man, I'm supposed to make sure you are dressed and ready on time, so let's go. Last thing I want is Leia ticked off at me."

Han laughed. "I can relate, kid."

The garden was full of guests all seated as they awaited the procession of the bride. Han, Luke and Chewbacca stood in the gazebo with a holy man, waiting for the bride to arrive. Padmé stood in the front row, trying to keep her tears in check. She had helped Leia get dressed earlier, and both of them ended up in a mess of tears. Padmé tried to blame the hormones, but she knew that it was more than that. *It's not every day your only daughter gets married*, she thought. She turned back to the balcony to see if Anakin and Leia were on their way yet.

I wonder how Ani is doing, Padmé thought with a smile. Despite his stoic efforts, she knew him well enough to know that he was feeling very emotional today as well. As unlikely as it had seemed at one time, Leia and Anakin had grown very close. Padmé felt that their similarities were partly the reason for their closeness, for they were so very much alike in so many ways, *even the temptation they felt towards the Dark Side*.

It had been months since Leia's close brush with the Dark Side, and since then she had shown no more signs of succumbing to its lure. It was Anakin and Padmé's hope that marriage would stop that from ever happening.

"Are you all set?" Anakin asked as he entered Leia's room. He stopped when he saw her, and had to fight to maintain his composure. 'You look beautiful,' he told her as he walked

over to her. "The very image of your mother on our wedding day."

Leia smiled. "Really?" she asked, looking at herself in the mirror one last time.

Anakin came to stand behind her and looked at her reflection. "Really," he said with a smile. "Are you ready?"

Leia nodded. "Yes, I'm ready," she said. She turned around to face her father. "I'm ready."

"Good, I'm glad one of us is," Anakin said with a smile.

Leia laughed and linked her arm through his. "I love you, Dad," she said, laying her head against his arm for a moment. "It means so much to have you walk me down the aisle."

Anakin's control on his emotions was getting shakier by the minute. "I am honored to do so," he told her. "There was a time when I never would have imagined it possible that you'd want me to. We've come a long way, haven't we?"

Leia looked up at him. "Yes we have," she said. "And it's been your doing that has made it happen. The changes that you have undergone in the past two years have been incredible. I'm so proud to have you as my father."

That was all it took for Anakin to lose the modicum of control he had, and his eyes filled with tears. "Thank you, Leia," he said softly, kissing the top of her veil. "Now come, let's not keep your groom waiting. He's already perspiring down there."

Leia laughed. "Yeah, I know he is," she said with a devilish twinkle in her eyes.

"You're so much like me it scares me," Anakin said as they left the room arm in arm.

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The musicians started the processional march as the congregation stood up to greet the bride. Padmé felt the tears filling her eyes when she caught sight of Leia on Anakin's arm descending the stone staircase and enter the garden terrace.

It brought to mind her own wedding day, that magical day so long ago when she and Anakin, a mere 19 years old, had pledged themselves to one another. Unlike Leia and Han, they'd had no guests at their wedding, no music, and the only flowers were the hanging baskets that decorated the terrace and the simple nosegay she had held in her hands. *Leia's marriage will not have the obstacles that ours did... she will not have to live in fear of discovery, or be separated from her husband for months on end.*

Padmé turned to look at Han now, and smiled. His face bore an expression of happiness, fear and nervousness all mixed in together. She saw Luke standing by his side, a serene expression on his face. *He's a born Jedi*, she reflected, feeling a surge of pride for her son. Almost as though he knew what she was thinking, the baby son within her gave her a strong kick. *I haven't forgotten about you, little one*, she thought, rubbing her belly lovingly. *I'm sure you will be a strong Jedi too one day, just like your big brother and sister, just like your father.*

Anakin and Leia reached the small altar that had been erected in the gazebo, and were greeted by the cleric. Anakin turned to Leia, seeing in her eyes that she was as emotional as he was by this point. He smiled at her, and kissed her softly on the cheek. "Be happy," he said simply, and then placed her hand in Han's. Leia smiled and nodded to her father, and then turned to Han.

Anakin then turned and walked over to join Padmé in the front row. He put his arm around her and kissed her before returning his attention to the wedding proceedings.

So far so good, Luke thought as the guests mingled about, enjoying the hors d'oeuvres and the beautiful weather. He watched his sister and new brother-in-law as they were congratulated by their guests. *I've never seen Leia look so happy*, Luke reflected with a smile. *And as for Han*, Luke grinned as he saw the look of utter bliss on Han's face. *I never would have imagined this four years ago...* Luke remembered the first time Han and Leia had set eyes on one another...

This is some rescue! When you came in here didn't you have a plan for getting out?

He's the brains, sweetheart!

What the hell are you doing?

Somebody has to save our skins! Into the garbage shoot, fly boy!

It hardly seemed possible that they were now married; but somehow Luke had had a feeling that they were meant for one another, even in those early days.

A grand feast soon followed, and it was starting to seem as though the day would go off without incident. Anakin and Padmé were finally starting to relax and allow themselves to enjoy their daughter's wedding. The meal had been carefully prepared by the palace's own staff, so that there was no chance of poisoning. Dessert had already been served when servants appeared with trays of champagne.

"Champagne, your majesty?"

Anakin looked up to see a young woman standing before him offering him a glass of champagne. He was not normally one to drink alcohol of any kind, his years of Jedi training had ingrained him deeply to avoid it, but this was a special occasion. Besides, he was expected to give a toast to the newlyweds, and so he took the glass that the servant handed to him.

"Well, I guess this is my big moment," he said to Padmé as he stood up.

Padmé looked up at him and smiled. "You'll do just fine," she assured him, taking his hand in hers.

Anakin kissed her hand as he raised the glass of champagne with his other hand. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a loud voice. He waited until all the guests quieted down and gave him their attention. "I would like to propose a toast to the bride and groom."

Anakin wanted to speak his mind, but he was mindful of the charade that they still needed to perpetrate. It wasn't known that Leia was his daughter; he had given her away in marriage, but merely in the capacity of the emperor. He wanted so desperately to let the gathering before him know his true feelings about the newlyweds, but it was not yet time; he still had work to do before he could reveal his true identity, and so he kept his toast simple, deciding that later, when it was just his family present, he would rectify the situation by making a proper salute to Han and Leia.

"To the newlyweds," he concluded, raising his glass aloft.

Everyone present raised their glass as well, and then the sound of clinking glasses was heard all over the terrace.

Anakin took a sip of the champagne, finding it bitter and unappealing. He swallowed it and then another small sip before setting his glass down. "I guess that will have to suffice for now," he said to Padmé.

"Leia and Han know how you truly feel, Ani," she replied with a smile. "Don't worry."

Anakin nodded as he sat down beside his wife. *Something is wrong*, he thought. *Something is very wrong*... It started with an increase in his heart rate, followed quickly by blurred vision; by the time his hands started to shake, he knew what had happened. He looked at Padmé, who turned to him. She grew alarmed when she looked at his face. "Ani, what is it?" she asked anxiously, putting her hand on his. She started when she felt him trembling and looked back up at him. "Anakin, what is it!?"

He only managed one word before he lost consciousness. "Poisoned."

"Anakin!" Padmé screamed as he slumped onto the table. "Someone help! He's been poisoned! Luke! Leia!"

Luke and Leia were on their feet in an instant and ran over to where Anakin lay.

“Daddy!” Leia cried. She looked up and scanned the room, and then looked at Luke. ‘She’s here,’ she said. “I know it!”

Luke nodded. By now the guards had blocked off all the exits, and panic had set in among the guests.

“Get a medidroid down here at once,” Luke ordered to the clones, “and round up all the servants who were serving champagne.”

“Right away sir!”

Medidroids appeared at once as the clones rounded up the servants, the guests sitting in shock at the turn of events. *The bride called the emperor “daddy”? What could this mean? The empress called Lord Vengeance ‘Luke’...surely she doesn’t mean Luke Skywalker? Just who is our emperor?*

“Unless we can discover the nature of the substance, we cannot administer an antidote,” the medidroid told Padmé. “I suggest we place him in stasis until we can do so.”

“Will that sustain him until we can find the antidote?” Padmé asked anxiously.

“It is not likely he will survive more than twenty-four hours without the antidote, your majesty,” the droid replied as the second droid and Luke lifted Anakin’s inert body onto a medical stretcher. “While being in stasis will slow down the effects of the poison, it will not stop it completely. Enough damage can occur in twenty-four hours to kill him if nothing is done to counteract the poison in his system.”

“Oh Leia,” Padmé said, turning to her daughter. “We can’t let this happen!”

Leia was silent, the fury in her unlike any she’d ever felt as she watched her father being taken inside the palace. Her eyes fell upon the champagne glass at her father’s place.

“The champagne,” she told Padmé. ‘There’s still some in his glass, we can find out what the poison is,’ she said. “There’s still hope, Mum!”

Padmé nodded. “Get Threepio,” she ordered one of the nearby clones. “Have him analyze this at once.”

“Right away!”

Chapter 103

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"We can find out what the poison is," Luke said calmly. Leia looked up at him, sensing in him tremendous anger. It alarmed her.

"Sir, the servants have been rounded up and are under guard in the parlor," a clone informed Luke, Leia, and Han, who had joined them by now. "The empress has accompanied the emperor upstairs to the medical facility."

"Very good," Luke replied evenly. He turned to Leia. 'Come on,' he said. "You know what to do."

Leia nodded. She looked up at Han. "This won't take long," she said.

"You do what you need to do to catch the bastards responsible for this," Han told her. "I'll see what I can find out about your dad's condition."

Leia nodded, fighting to maintain control of her emotions. She then turned and followed Luke into the palace and to the parlor, where several royal guards and clone troopers were holding a group of terrified looking servants captive.

Luke and Leia started walking around the group, each going in a different direction, not saying a word. They examined each individual one by one, probing their minds as they did so. They encountered the same emotions with each mind they touched: fear, anxiety, and bewilderment. Most of them knew nothing about what had even happened, and were puzzled by their incarceration. Yet even amidst the innocent, ignorant minds, both Luke and Leia knew that there was one who knew what was going on, one who was desperately trying to block them from discovering their identity. Luke and Leia discovered her at the same moment and stopped as they did so. They looked at each other from across the room, conferring with one another silently.

"You may release the rest of these people," Leia told the guards as Luke approached the woman. "All but this one."

Tyria Royle looked nervously from Luke to Leia and back again. "What are you holding me for?" she challenged them. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"Don't even try to defend yourself," Luke said angrily. "We have both seen the truth in your mind."

"Oh please," Royle replied, rolling her eyes. "Don't try to frighten me with your Jedi bullshit. I don't believe in that crap for a second."

Leia raised one hand and sent the woman flying across the room to land against a wall. Royle fell to the floor, badly shaken. She stood up and warily looked at the two Jedi before her.

"You may wish to rethink your opinion of the Jedi," Luke said. "My sister and I are more powerful than you can even imagine."

For the first time, Luke and Leia saw fear in their adversary's eyes.

"Tell us the poison you put in our father's champagne," Leia said, using the Force to add emphasis to her words. "Tell us before we are forced to give you another demonstration of our power."

"I don't have to tell you anything," Royle replied. "Your father is getting what he deserves. Darth Vader has never stood trial for his crimes—it's time he paid for all the blood he shed."

"You have no right to judge him!" Leia cried, her fury rising. "Who are you to decide his fate? He is the greatest Jedi who ever lived! He is saving the galaxy, are you so foolish that you can't see that?"

"Bite me, Princess," Royle spat back.

Suddenly she found herself on the floor, bolts of electricity ripping through her body.

"I find your lack of respect disturbing," Luke said, glaring down at her as he walked toward her. Using the Force he picked her up and took her head in his hands.

"Now, are you going to tell us? Or do we need to get aggressive?" he asked.

Royle looked up at him, her green eyes wide with terror. She could feel her mind being probed by both of them, and it was an unnerving sensation. *It was only a matter of time before they found what they were looking for, and then what? What will they do with me after they've found what they want? Maybe if I tell them what they want they'll let me live...*

"Ryscandor," Luke said at last, releasing her abruptly. He looked at his sister. "That's the poison. We need to get this information to the medics at once."

Leia nodded. "I'll go," she said, running from the room.

"What are you going to do with me?" Royle asked as she backed away from Luke.

Luke looked back at her. "Tell me where your accomplices are," he said simply, knowing she was too terrified to be uncooperative.

"I... I don't know where they are," she stammered. "They were here but..."

Luke turned to the clones. "Take her," they said. "She will help you find the other two."

One of the clones came up to her and took her roughly by the arm. "Let's go," he said gruffly.

"Commander Corso," Luke said, addressing the leader of the squadron.

"Yes my lord?" the clone responded at once.

"I want these prisoners well guarded," Luke told him. "They are extremely dangerous and unpredictable. Use whatever means necessary to keep them contained, even if it means binding them."

"Understood, my lord."

Padmé paced up and down in the medical room, her anxiety rising with each passing moment. Ironically, Anakin had created this facility within the palace for her, so that she could give birth to their son at home, without the need for going to a public medical facility. *Thank the Force he did so*, she reflected, realizing that he may not have survived the trip to the hospital in the city.

The medidroids had placed Anakin in stasis in a desperate attempt to sustain him until an antidote could be found. Threepio was still trying to determine the poison, and so far, had not had any success in doing so. *Every minute that passes brings Ani closer to death*, Padmé realized numbly. *How can I bear to lose him now? After all we've been through? With the birth of our child mere weeks away?*

"Mum! Mum! We have the name of the poison!" Leia cried as she burst into the room, holding her wedding gown up so she could run.

"What is it?" the medidroid asked.

"Ryscandor," Leia replied breathlessly. "It's Ryscandor."

"We'll start on an antidote at once," the droid replied.

"You're certain of that?" the only human medic in the room asked her. "Because if you're wrong, the antidote will kill him."

Leia looked at her mother. "Yes, we're certain," she said. 'Luke and I interrogated the woman who gave Dad the champagne,' she explained to Padmé. "Luke saw her mind, Mum, he knows for sure that this is it."

Padmé nodded, trusting her son's intuition completely. "Then that is it," she told the medic. "Proceed with the antidote at once."

"As you wish, your majesty," the medic replied, and then hurried to assist the droids who were already working frantically.

"Are you okay?" Leia asked her mother as she came over to her to hug her.

Padmé embraced Leia. "I don't know," she admitted softly. "I'm terrified of losing your father, Leia. I don't know what I'd do if he died."

Leia pulled back and looked at her mother. "He will not die, Mum!" she averred. "It won't happen. He's a Jedi, remember?"

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I know he is," she replied. 'But right now he's just a man fighting for his life,' she added. "And if they don't find the antidote in time, he will lose that fight."

Leia shook her head. "He won't die," she said, her voice full of emotion. "He can't die! I can't even think that he could die!"

Padmé could see that despite her strong exterior, Leia was just as frightened as she was. She pulled Leia back into her embrace and the two of them just held one another, praying that the man they both loved would survive this latest crisis.

Chapter 104

CHAPTER 105

"Lord Vengeance, a word with you please."

Luke left the medical facility and stepped out into the corridor where Commander Corso was waiting to speak to him.

"Have you located the other?" Luke asked.

"Yes sir," Corso replied. "They were on the grounds, trying to escape. We have them all in our custody now, sir. What shall we do with them?"

Luke considered his words for a moment. As a Jedi, he ought to feel compassion towards them, and give them the chance to defend their actions. But as the son of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala, he wanted them to pay for all the grief they had brought to his family. *Now I understand how my father turned to the Dark Side: he thought it would save someone he loved.*

"Take them to the detention center in the city," Luke replied. "Maximum security. Their punishment shall be determined as soon as this crisis is over."

"Of course, my lord," Corso replied and then left.

Luke returned to his mother and sister. "How is the antidote coming along?" he asked.

"They keep telling us they're getting closer," Padmé said, holding Anakin's hand and looking into his face. "I'm just afraid they're going to run out of time," she added quietly.

"They won't," Luke replied, putting an arm around his mother's shoulders.

"I wish I could be so sure," Padmé replied. She was exhausted, physically and emotionally, but refused to leave Anakin's side despite her children's suggestions that she rest.

"Your majesty, I think we have it," the medic announced.

Luke, Leia and Padmé turned to look in his direction. He held up a tube of pale blue liquid.

"Are you certain?" Padmé asked. "This is the antidote?"

"As certain as we can be," the medic replied. "We analyzed the chemical make up of the poison, and used it to extrapolate the antidote. Assuming of course the poison is what we think it is, the antidote should work."

"*Should* work?" Leia exclaimed. "That's the best you can do?"

"The emperor will surely die within the next twelve hours if we do not administer an antidote soon," the medic replied. "Would you have us do nothing rather than take the chance that we're right?"

Leia looked at Luke, and then at her mother.

“We have to do something,” Padmé said at last. “Every minute that passes reduces his chances of survival.”

Luke nodded. “I agree,” he said. “We have to take the chance.”

Leia looked at her father’s face, so still and pale in the state of stasis. *This was supposed to be the happiest day of my life*, she thought numbly. *How could this be happening? How is it possible that my father’s life is now hanging in the balance?*

“Yes, we do,” Leia said at last.

Padmé nodded and then turned back to the medic. “Do it,” she said.

The medic nodded, and then left them to prepare a syringe.

Luke and Leia came over to stand beside their mother, each one of them taking a hand as they waited for the medic to administer the antidote.

“In order for it to have maximum and most rapid effect, we must administer it directly to his heart,” the medic told them when he returned to Anakin’s bedside. “It will of course bring him out of his stasis at once.”

Padmé nodded. “Will there be any side effects?” she asked as the medic prepared to administer the antidote.

“There shouldn’t be,” he replied, watching as one of the medidroids pulled open Anakin’s tunic to expose his bare chest. “Here we go,” he said, and then plunged the syringe into Anakin’s chest.

Padmé squeezed her children’s hands as she watched for a reaction. She didn’t need to wait long. Anakin’s eyes snapped open as he took a deep breath. His eyes darted around the room, resting at last on Padmé.

“Padmé, what... what happened?” he asked, totally disoriented.

Padmé smiled, tears springing to her eyes. “Ani, thank the gods!” she cried, throwing her arms around him.

Anakin hugged his wife, still confused. He looked up at his children as though asking them what was going on.

“You were poisoned, remember?” Luke told him. “Your champagne contained a lethal dose of ryscandor.”

“But we found the antidote in time,” the medic informed him.

Anakin nodded as it all started coming back to him. “The champagne, yes, I remember now,” he said as Padmé released him. “I was foolish to take the glass from her, I should have known something was wrong when she handed me a glass instead of offering me one from a tray.”

“I think we were all expecting the attack to be on Mum,” Leia said. “No one expected you to be their target, Dad. I’m just so grateful you’re okay,” she added, hugging him next.

"We have the three miscreants locked up, Dad," Luke told his father. "They are being taken to the detention center even as we speak under heavy guard."

"So they did use Leia's wedding day to make their attack," Anakin said, looking up at his daughter. "I'm sorry this had to happen on your big day, Leia," he said.

"You're okay, that's all that matters," Leia replied. "That's all I care about right now, Dad."

Anakin smiled. "How were you able to determine the poison? From what I know of Ryscandor it is virtually undetectable."

"That would explain why Threepio couldn't identify it," Padmé commented.

"We interrogated Royle," Luke replied. "The one who served you the champagne."

"Also the one who abducted you, Mum," Leia added.

"Interrogated," Anakin said, looking at this children closely. "I'm assuming your... interrogation did not employ any methods unworthy of a Jedi," he commented.

Luke and Leia looked at one another.

"Does it matter now?" Leia replied. "We found what we needed. I think either of us would have done anything necessary to make sure your life was saved."

Anakin knew his daughter well enough to read between the lines. Yet, how could he be critical of their methods considering all he had done in his life to save the ones he loved?

"I'd like to examine the emperor now that he's awake," the medic stated. "If you don't mind."

Padmé kissed Anakin on the cheek. "We'll be right back," she told him.

Anakin nodded as he watched the three of them leave, and lay back against the pillow to allow the medic to perform his examination.

"What did your father mean by methods unworthy of a Jedi?" Padmé asked her children as they stood in the corridor.

"Well, I suppose he meant any methods that employed the powers of the Dark Side," Luke replied.

Padmé frowned. "You didn't use the Dark Side, did you?" she asked.

Luke hesitated before responding. How would his mother react if she knew that he had thrown Sith Lightning at their prisoner? Or that the two of them had mentally assaulted her to get the information they needed?

"If we hadn't, Dad might not have survived," Leia said at last. "Isn't that what is important?"

Padmé nodded. "I suppose so," she said, though not without a certain amount of uneasiness.

"Besides, we have bigger problems to deal with," Luke remarked. "I have no doubt that the events of the past twelve hours have raised questions among the wedding guests. I'm

afraid our masquerade has come to an end.”

“I called him Daddy in front of everyone,” Leia realized in horror. “What if they realize who he is? Who we all are?”

“I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before they figure it out,” Padmé replied. “But perhaps it’s time for the truth to come out anyway. The groundwork has been laid; maybe it’s time for the transition to take place.”

“We may have no choice,” Leia remarked. “If the empire knows that their Emperor is in fact Anakin Skywalker, then we must be prepared to act fast to prevent any backlash.”

“Hopefully that won’t happen,” Luke replied. “Dad has worked tirelessly to remove any trouble spots from positions of power for the past several months.”

“And Mum and I have recreated the framework for the creation of a new senate,” Leia put in. ‘You’re right, Mum,’ she said, turning to Padmé. “The groundwork is in place.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, let’s hope that all this will mean a smooth transition. I for one am tired of all this conflict and I know your father feels the same way.”

“Leia and I have known nothing but conflict all our lives,” Luke remarked. “Peace sounds really nice about now.”

“You may come in,” a medidroid informed them from the doorway.

They walked in at once and found Anakin standing up, looking as though nothing had happened.

“Anakin!” Padmé exclaimed as she made her way over to him as fast as her condition would permit. “What are you doing up?”

“I’m fine, Padmé,” Anakin said, taking her by the shoulders. “I’ve been given a clean bill of health.”

“Thank the Force for that,” Luke sighed. “I think this family has had more than its share of crises.”

“That’s for sure,” Leia agreed. “Now the question is, how much did the people downstairs manage to put together?”

Anakin frowned. “What do you mean?”

Luke and Leia explained to him what had happened and how the possibility that his and indeed the entire family’s true identities were no longer a secret. To the surprise of all, Anakin took this news rather well.

“Well, perhaps it’s time to put an end to the charade,” he said. “Perhaps it is time to unmask the emperor. We all knew that this wasn’t going to be forever, this masquerade. I for one am tired of it, and would gladly abdicate if the circumstances allow me to do so.”

“There’s only one way to determine that, Ani,” Padmé remarked. “Time to face your people, truly face them, and explain what you have been doing for the past several months. You may be surprised at their reaction.”

Anakin sighed. “Pleasantly surprised, hopefully,” he commented.

Padmé linked her arm through his. “No matter what, you know we will all be behind you, Ani, come what may.”

Anakin smiled at her. “I know that, angel,” he said. ‘I’m a lucky man to have such a family.’ He looked at Leia. “What’s going on downstairs?”

“I think everyone is still here,” she told him. “They are anxious to see how you are, Dad. This could be the moment to reveal yourself, with the Empire’s elite all gathered in one place. And the incident involving the attempt on your life will show them just how seriously you are committed to leading the galaxy to peace.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Padmé said. “That is if Leia and Han don’t mind you upstaging their wedding,” she added.

Leia smiled. “Well I think that rebel assassin has already done that,” she commented. “I can’t think of a better wedding gift than an end of the galactic conflict that I’ve spent my life fighting.”

“Then let’s do it,” Luke said. “The timing couldn’t be better.”

Anakin nodded. “I agreed,” he said, looking down at his wife. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter 105

CHAPTER 106

In the great hall below, Admiral Piett had done his best to calm down the wedding guests, and to reassure them that things were not nearly as dire as they seemed. He himself was not even certain that Anakin was alive, and was deeply troubled by what had happened. Since his redemption, Anakin Skywalker had become a good friend to Piett; the thought that such a friend could very well be dead at the hands of an assassin was horrifying to Piett, especially considering he himself had failed to weed out and apprehend the known enemies of the emperor.

“What the devil is going on, Piett?” demanded one man, seconded by several others. “Just what is the emperor hiding from us all?”

“I assure you that the emperor has hidden nothing from anyone,” Piett replied. “And that he has nothing but the best interests of the Empire at heart.”

“Why don’t I believe that anymore?” another man shouted. “If he has nothing to hide, then why the disguise? Why won’t he let anyone see his face?”

Several people shouted their agreement. Piett was at a loss, not knowing what to tell them. He was about to respond when a commotion began at the other end of the room. Piett looked over to see Anakin descending the stairs, unmasked, along with his family. Piett breathed a sigh of relief to see his friend alive, and also for his timely arrival. *How are you going to salvage this mess, Anakin?* He wondered to himself, having no doubts whatsoever that Skywalker would find a way.

Anakin stopped at the landing half way down the stairs and stepped over to the railing, facing the crowd of people. One by one the guests recognized him, and started talking amongst one another, all of them shocked to see before them the Hero without Fear. Anakin held up a hand to gain their attention, and within a few moments, they were silent, waiting expectantly for him to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “I’m sure that you are all rather confused by what has happened here today.”

Murmurs of assent were heard among the guests.

“I can promise you that it has never been my intention to trick anyone,” Anakin continued.

“Then why the disguise?” shouted one brave soul.

Anakin sighed, and looked briefly at his wife. “That is a valid question,” he replied. “I am fairly confident that most of you know who I am,” he continued. “For those who do not, I am Anakin Skywalker.”

“What did you do to Darth Vader?” one man shouted.

“I...I did nothing to Darth Vader,” Anakin replied. “I *am* Darth Vader, or rather I was.”

The murmurs grew louder at this point. “That doesn’t make any sense!” someone shouted, seconded by others.

“It is a long story,” Anakin continued. “But one I feel you need to know. Until I was the age of twenty-two, I was known as Anakin Skywalker. I was a Jedi Knight, I fought in the Clone Wars, and served the Republic in any way I could. For reasons that are far too complex to get into here, I...fell from grace. I was used, manipulated, lured into believing that the Dark Side of the Force would enable me to save someone that I loved from what I believed was certain death. It was the late emperor Palpatine who did this, all the while plotting on destroying the Republic and placing himself in the position to rule the galaxy. I became Darth Vader when I willingly helped him do this, turning my back on the Jedi, the Republic, and all those to whom I had sworn allegiance.” Anakin stopped, his public confession proving more difficult than he had foreseen. Padmé stepped up to him and took his hand. He looked down at her with a smile, grateful for her love and support.

“No doubt many of you recognize my wife,” Anakin continued, looking at Padmé, ‘as being Padmé Amidala, former Queen and senator of Naboo. After my injuries, Palpatine told me that my wife had died, at my hand. I believed him, and for twenty years lived in utter darkness, the thought that I had killed my wife and our unborn child slowly destroying what was left of my soul. It wasn’t until after the Battle of Yavin that I realized how Palpatine had used me. You see, it was my son, Luke Skywalker, who destroyed the Death Star,’ he said, turning to Luke. “My son, who was a member of the Rebel Alliance, was the proof that made me realize that I had been lied to, that my life of the past two decades had been based on lies and deceit. It was at this point I realized that Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan was my daughter, for, as you can see, the resemblance to her mother was too striking to be mere coincidence. Having realized that my children were alive, I deduced that everything Palpatine had told me were lies; that my wife was alive, that my injuries were reparable— and I was correct. Palpatine must have known that I was on to him, for he captured my children and my wife, and would have killed them all had I not killed him first. That is where my story meets the present day,” he concluded. “I am not, nor have I been, a man pretending to be someone else. Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader are the same man, simply different sides of the same coin. I renounced the Dark Side many months ago, and have spent the past several months trying my best to undo all the damages that Palpatine’s reign of terror had incurred. I want nothing more than to put an end to the injustice that this empire has represented for the past two decades. With the help of my family, I have laid the groundwork for the creation of a new democracy, a new peace. Overtures of peace have already been made to the rebel alliance; they are more than happy to put an end to the fighting. The question is, do you, elite members of the Imperial bureaucracy, want peace? Do you want to put an end to the tyranny that this empire has imposed over most of the galaxy? I have every intention of abdicating in favor of a democratic government, but I need the support of you to do so.”

“If you step down,” one man asked, “then who will take over control of the bureaucracy?” Several people added their voices to his question.

“A valid question,” Anakin replied. “My intention is to establish a new Republic, one governed by a senate, with the senate governed by a chancellor, as it was in the days before democracy was contaminated by the wickedness that was Palpatine.”

“Would you be that chancellor?” one woman asked.

Anakin shook his head. “No, I have no wish to be chancellor. My destiny lies along a different path, namely to reestablish the order of the Jedi, hopefully with the assistance of my children. I think my wife would serve far more effectively in that capacity than I would.”

Padmé looked at Anakin in surprise. “You want me to be chancellor?” she asked in surprise.

“Who better?” he asked. ‘Of course, you’d need a replacement for a while,’ he added with a smile. “Perhaps Leia would serve in that capacity.”

Leia smiled. “I’d be honored to do so, Dad,” she replied.

Anakin turned back to the crowd gathered before them. “Of course all of this is moot if you are not behind it. So what say you? Should we continue this bickering and fruitless fighting amongst ourselves, or should we start anew, and give the galaxy the peace it has been denied for so long?”

Anakin and his family waited as the people considered his words, talking amongst themselves. Then, one by one, they started clapping, until soon they were all applauding in unanimous approval of their emperor’s stirring words.

Padmé turned to Anakin with a smile, her eyes shining with tears. “Ani, listen to them!” she said.

Anakin nodded, overwhelmed by the show of support from his subjects. “I think perhaps our reign is over,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé nodded, and put her arm around his waist, immensely proud to be standing by his side, to be a part of the new republic that was in its birth throes.

“Congratulations, sir,” Firmus Piett said as he reached Anakin and his family. “It seems your plan has worked splendidly. The galaxy is in your debt.”

Anakin shook his head as he shook Piett’s hand. “No, Firmus,” he said. “The galaxy owes me nothing; I have only done what I needed to be done; undoing the destruction that I helped to make.”

Piett nodded, understanding completely. “Well I believe you have done that, sir,” he said. “And it was an honor to have a small part in helping you do so.”

“I couldn’t have done it without your help, Firmus,” Anakin told him. “And I hope that you will continue to be a part of this process; Axxila needs a senator, after all.”

Piett’s eyes widened. “Me? You want me to represent my home planet in the senate?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I do. What do you say?”

Piett smiled. “I would be honored to do so.”

“For now, do you suppose you could do something to gracefully get rid of these people?” Anakin asked. “It’s been a rather long day for my family, and I think we’d all like some time alone.”

Piett chuckled. “I’d be happy to do so, sir. Again, my congratulations, to all of you.”

“Thank you, Firmus,” Padmé replied with a smile.

Piett bowed to her and then turned to leave them.

“Does that mean we can finally get down to the party?” Han asked as they watched the people below start to disperse.

Luke laughed. “Yeah, I think we’re all ready for that, aren’t we Dad?”

Anakin nodded, putting an arm around Padmé. “Yes, I think so too.”

Chapter 106

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Over the next few weeks, all the pieces fell into place. Leia and Han enjoyed a brief honeymoon, after which Leia took her place in the new senate as its interim chancellor. She continued with her Jedi training under her father's tutelage when her duties permitted it.

Anakin and his son spent a great deal of time in the Jedi Temple, along with Yoda, who was very pleased to see the Chosen One finally fulfilling his destiny. Together the three of them, under the watchful eyes of Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, began the slow process of rebuilding the once noble establishment. It was difficult for Anakin to spend so much time in the temple, for memories of that horrible night of Order 66 still haunted him. Yet, it was therapeutic for him, and he found the longer he spent there, the easier it became to face the past.

Having abdicated their titles of emperor and empress, Anakin and Padmé remained in the palace, having made the renovations for their new child; it only made sense to do so. Leia and Han had taken an apartment in the city, and Luke had taken to staying at the temple, immersing himself completely in the Jedi way of life. He did, however, spend a lot of time with his parents in their home, not quite able to be apart from them for too long. Besides that, he sensed his father's nervousness growing as the baby's due date approached. Luke was secretly amused to see his father, who had been in his life a Jedi hero, a Sith Lord, and an emperor, become so unnerved at the prospect of child birth. Luke thought perhaps it was because of the dreams that had haunted Anakin when Padmé was expecting the first time. But there had been no dreams this time, and all Luke could attribute it to was his father's devotion to his mother, the thought of her being in pain too difficult for him to bear.

"Sounds like you have everything well in hand," Padmé said to Leia as the family enjoyed dinner together. "I am so pleased that the transition has gone so well."

"You two did a lot of work to make it so, Padmé," Anakin pointed out.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, but it was well worth it. I can't tell you how much it means to me to have been a part in the rebirth of democracy."

"It's only fitting that you would be," Anakin commented. "Since you were always such a strong defender of it."

Padmé nodded, pushing her plate away. "I can't eat another bite," she said.

"You barely ate anything," Anakin said with a frown. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I guess there just isn't much room down there," she said, rubbing her large belly with a smile. "Everything is sort of squashed right now."

"Wasn't he due last week?" Luke asked.

"Yes, he was," Padmé sighed. "I suppose he's not in any hurry."

"The doctor can give you something to bring him on, Mum," Leia reminded her.

"Oh no," Padmé said with a shake of her head. "You and Luke were induced; I'm not going through *that* again. He'll just have to come when he's good and ready."

Anakin smiled. *You don't know how right you are, Padmé*

Anakin lay awake later that night. He could not sleep, for he could not shake the feeling that tonight would be the night. Granted, he had felt this way before, as each day passed beyond Padmé's due date. But somehow tonight seemed different; it was as though his tiny unborn son had let him in on the secret, telling him that tonight was the night he was going to make his big appearance.

Anakin turned onto his side and watched as the shadow of his wife's body slept. She had her back to him, for sleeping on her side was the only way possible at this point. He wrapped his arm around her, smiling to himself as he noticed with each passing week how much more of her there was to embrace. *Well Ani, is this the night?* He thought to himself. *Is this the night we all get to meet you?*

Eventually he drifted off into a fitful sleep, half prepared to be woken up at any moment

Senate Chambers— late the next afternoon

Padmé felt overwhelmed with emotion as she stood watching Leia address the assembled senators. *She is a natural leader*, she thought, brushing a tear away as it made its slow descent down her face.

"You okay, Padmé?" Han asked as he stood beside her.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I'm just so proud of her," she told her son-in-law.

Han smiled. "Yeah, me too," he said. "You know you may have a hard time getting your job back," he quipped.

Padmé laughed. "Well, to be honest, I wouldn't mind that at all. Having a new baby will take up much of my time; I don't know how I'll manage being chancellor once Ani's born."

"Don't you mean *if* he's born?" Luke said from the other side of her. "I'm beginning to think that kid is never going to arrive."

Padmé simply smiled. "Patience," she said. "Isn't that a Jedi virtue?" she teased her son.

Luke laughed. "Yes, it is," he replied. "But I'm my father's son, remember," he added.

"Now now, your father's patience has increased tremendously over the years," Padmé replied. "Believe me."

"Speaking of Anakin, where is he?" Han asked.

"He's at the Jedi Temple," Luke replied. "There are a couple of younglings he and Yoda are testing."

"That's great," Han said. "More recruits, eh?"

Luke smiled. "Yeah, something like that. I'm sure he'll have little Ani using a light saber before he can walk."

Padmé laughed. "I think you're right," she agreed. She looked down at the assembly below. "I think they're wrapping up now," she said.

"Good, I'm starving," Han said.

Luke laughed. "You're always starving, Han."

"Like you're not?" he countered as the three of them started to walk away.

Padmé walked along with her son and son-in-law, finding the simple action of walking more and more difficult as each day passed by. The baby had dropped by now, making her day to day existence increasingly more challenging. Luke and Leia had been induced a few weeks early, so she hadn't endured this discomfort with them. *Not to mention the practice contractions*, she reflected, which seemed to be coming more and more frequently as the days went by.

"You were incredible!" Han said as he embraced his wife. "Had them eating out of your hand," he added.

Leia laughed. "Well, I don't know about that," she replied. "But thanks."

"Han's right," Luke piped up. "I was really proud of you up there, little sister."

Leia smiled. "Thanks, big brother," she teased. She looked at her mother. "I have mighty big shoes to fill," she commented.

"You are doing a remarkable job of filling them, Leia," Padmé said, kissing her on the cheek. "I'm very proud of you. Now let's be off, we're supposed to meet your father for dinner at 1800."

"I'm starving," Leia said, taking Han's hand. "Lead the way."

"So how did the testing go?" Luke asked his father as they sat around a round table in one of Coruscant City's finer dining establishments.

"Very promising," Anakin replied. "Both Yoda and I agreed that they are highly promising. I thought maybe he'd object to their age, but he was okay with it."

"Well, I suppose Luke and Leia have proven that one need not start their training as a youngling in order to be a powerful Jedi," Han commented.

"Yes, I'm sure that has something to do with it," Anakin replied.

"The fact that there aren't many Force sensitive younglings around could be a factor too," Luke remarked.

"Well, at least until a certain someone is born," Leia added, looking at her mother.

Padmé however was not following the conversation, for she was trying to decide if the contraction she was feeling was a real one or not.

"Mum? You okay?" Leia asked, reaching her hand over to take Padmé's.

Padmé looked at her. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "I think so."

Anakin immediately became alarmed. “You think so?” he echoed. “Maybe we should go,” he said, starting to stand up.

“Ani, don’t panic,” Padmé replied, pulling him back down. ‘It’s probably just another practice contraction,’ she assured him. “I get them all the time.”

“How can you tell the difference?” Leia asked. “I mean, it could be real, couldn’t it?”

“Yes, it could,” Padmé replied. “But even if it is, the baby won’t come for hours yet. Let’s just relax and enjoy our meal, okay? Please?”

Anakin sighed, not looking relaxed at all. “Very well,” he agreed begrudgingly. “But you so much as feel another twinge I want you to tell me.”

Padmé leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, knowing how nervous he was about the impending birth of their child. “I will, I promise,” she told him.

They ate their meal, which arrived shortly thereafter. Anakin only half listened to the conversation that was going on, for he was completely attuned to his wife. He knew her well enough to know that she was not one to complain; and even though she had promised to tell him if another contraction came, he still wasn’t convinced that she would do so.

Padmé did her best to hide how she was feeling, but there was no doubt in her mind that her labor had indeed started. But she knew from experience that it would be many hours before she would need medical attention, and so she decided to keep quiet. She could see how closely Anakin was watching her and couldn’t help but smile at his solicitousness. She worried, however, about how he would handle it when things got really intense; he had never been able to stand seeing her in pain of any kind. How would he deal with her labor?

“Time to get you home,” Anakin said as the waitress cleared their dishes away. “I can’t shake the feeling that there is more going on than you’re telling me,” he added as he helped her up.

Padmé looked up at him with a smile. “You worry too much,” she said.

“That’s because you don’t worry enough,” he countered, kissing her on the cheek.

Padmé laughed, but stopped as she felt another contraction grip her. *That one was pretty intense*, she thought to herself, happy all of a sudden that they were going home.

Chapter 107

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The ride home seemed longer than usual; things weren't made any simpler by the traffic which seemed more congested than normal. Padmé shifted in her seat as she felt another contraction. *That's three in twenty minutes*, she thought to herself. *I hope this traffic clears up soon*, she reflected envying her children for the relatively short distance they had to get home.

"Ani," she said at last, realizing that she needed to let him know what was going on. "Isn't there some other way we can go?"

"I wish there was," he replied. "But they've closed two laneways because of an accident, and..." he stopped and looked at her. "Padmé, you've had another contraction, haven't you?" he said.

"Well, actually I've had another two," she admitted. "Make that three," she added, feeling another one.

Anakin was beside himself. "Why didn't you tell me!?" he cried, looking frantically for a way out of the traffic gridlock he found himself mired in. "How far apart are they?" he asked, torn between attending to her and watching the traffic.

"I think about ten minutes," she said as she released a long cleansing breath. "It's okay, Ani; ten minutes is a long time. Don't worry."

"Don't worry!" he exclaimed incredulously. "We're stuck in traffic chaos and you are in labor, how can I not worry?"

"Labor is a long process," she assured him. "It could be hours before he comes."

"Could be," he repeated. "*Could* be. Or it could be sooner, right? You really don't know, do you?"

"Well, I don't know exactly when, no," she said. "But I have been through this before, Ani. I know how long it takes."

Anakin frowned, fighting the urge to Force push the vehicles that were surrounding him. "I can't believe this is happening," he muttered, shaking his head. "Of all the times for there to be an accident! Don't they realize my wife is having a baby?"

Padmé had to suppress a giggle at Anakin's mutterings. "No, they don't," she assured him. "And every one of them is just as anxious as we are to get home."

"Not quite," he replied, taking the speeder up several stories, dodging other vehicles along the way, not caring that he was violating every traffic ordinance in the city.

"Ani, what are you doing?" Padmé asked in alarm.

"Getting you home," he said. "By whatever means necessary."

Padmé gripped the arm rests of her seat as Anakin weaved and dodged his way out of the jumbled mass of speeders. Soon they were in the clear and racing home. Although she was alarmed by Anakin's apparent recklessness, Padmé was relieved that they were on their way now, for the contractions were becoming more intense. The thought had crossed her mind that she may not make it home — but thanks to Anakin's legendary piloting skills, they were going to make it. At least that's what she kept telling herself. *I'm going to make it... we're almost home, we're almost home... we're almost...*

"Ani!" she cried as she gripped her abdomen, the pain ripping through her. "Hurry, Ani, hurry!"

"Breathe, Padmé," he urged her, allowing her to squeeze his hand. "Breathe!"

Anakin forced himself to focus on driving, which was very difficult for him as Padmé breathed through her contractions beside him. He wanted to comfort her, to help her in any way he could; but all he could do right now was reassure her with his words and drive like a madman to get her home.

"We're almost there, angel," he told her. "Almost there!"

Padmé nodded, closing her eyes, trying to relax as she prepared for another contraction. She didn't have to wait long. *Breathing doesn't do anything!* She thought in frustration. *Just some male physician's idea of a joke...* "Ani, they're coming faster..." she panted as the contraction ripped through her. "Oh please hurry!"

Anakin could see the palace now, and hit the accelerator. Activating his COM link he contacted the palace staff.

"My wife is in advanced labor, have a medical team meet us on the landing platform!" he ordered. "We'll be there in less than five minutes!" He turned and looked at Padmé. "We'll be home in a matter of minutes, angel," he told her. "Hold on."

"I'm trying," she told him. "It's progressing so quickly, Ani, I don't know how much longer..." she stopped as another contraction hit her and she cried out in pain.

Anakin felt utterly helpless. *They are less than three minutes apart*, he realized. *Didn't she say this would take hours??* "We're home, baby," he told her as he made the final approach to the landing platform. "We're home."

"Thank the gods," she gasped as the contraction ended.

Anakin landed the craft as the medical team headed out to meet them. He jumped out of his side of the speeder and raced around to help his wife out of hers.

"How far apart are the contractions?" the medidroid asked as Anakin helped Padmé out of the speeder.

"Less than three minutes," he informed it. "She's had at least seven in the past twenty minutes."

"Let's get her inside," the droid replied. "Sounds like she's pretty close."

Anakin lifted Padmé up into his arms and rushed into the palace.

“Ani, he’s pressing!” Padmé said as he ran into the foyer of the palace. “Ani I can’t wait!”

“We’re almost there, Padmé,” he told her as he took the stairs next, racing for the medical room.

“I can’t wait! Anakin, please!” she cried, near hysterics. “He’s coming, I can feel him!”

Anakin stopped at their bedroom and brought her inside, knowing that neither his heart nor her condition would allow him to reach the third floor. He set her on the bed as the droids took over. Anakin stepped back as they examined her, trying to catch his breath.

“The baby is crowning,” one of the droids reported.

Anakin nodded his understanding as he came over to Padmé’s side as the droids prepared her for delivery.

“So much for the medical room,” she said to him between contractions.

He smiled at her. “Next time,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Next time?” she repeated incredulously. “I don’t think there will be a...” She stopped as another contraction hit her. They were almost one upon the other now.

“Okay, milady, time to push,” the droid told her as Anakin helped her to sit up on the edge of the bed. He held her hand as she bore down. ‘That’s it, angel,’ he encouraged her. “You’re doing great!”

Padmé was exhausted by now, and could only nod in response. She closed her eyes to regain her strength between contractions. There wasn’t much of a respite as another one hit immediately.

Anakin watched as his son made his way into the world, the emotions that filled him beyond anything he had ever experienced. And when the tiny boy’s cries filled the room, he lost what was left of his composure.

“You have a new son,” the droid said, holding the new baby up to show Anakin and Padmé.

Both of them were crying, the joy of the moment overwhelming them. Neither of them could speak for a moment, and simply embraced one another tightly as the droids cleaned up the baby and diapered him.

“Your son,” the droid said, holding the baby out to Padmé. She took him in her arms and kissed him softly.

“He’s so beautiful,” Anakin said, staring in awe at his new son. “Padmé, I’ve never felt anything like this in my life. He’s so... so perfect.”

Padmé looked up at him, her eyes shining. “He is,” she said with a smile. “Would you like to hold him?”

Anakin merely nodded and held out his arms to receive the tiny bundle. Padmé laid little Anakin in his father’s arms, loving the expression of utter adoration and wonder on her husband’s face. Anakin pulled his new born son close to him, studying his face, taking in every detail of him. “He has your nose,” he decided at last.

Padmé laughed. “You think so?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, definitely,” he replied. ‘I’d recognize it anywhere,’ he added with a smile. He kissed the small boy on the tip of his nose, feeling the power of the father son bond already. He looked up at his wife. “You were amazing, Padmé,” he said. “I’ve never experienced anything so beautiful in my life. Thank you,” he said, returning his gaze to his son’s face. “Thank you for this beautiful child.”

Padmé felt her tears begin anew. “Thank you for being here for me,” she said. “*You* were amazing.”

Anakin looked down at her. “I’m happy I was able to experience the birth of one of my children,” he said wistfully. “It almost makes up for not being there for Luke and Leia’s birth.”

Padmé nodded. “Maybe we ought to let them know,” she said.

Anakin smiled. “Somehow I have a feeling they already know,” he said, realizing that little Ani’s brother and sister would no doubt have sensed his arrival into the world through their Force bond. ‘Just wait until they see this little boy,’ he said. “I think he’s going to be rather spoiled, don’t you think?”

Padmé nodded. “Oh, no doubt of it,” she said. “If the roomful of toys in the nursery is any indication, he will indeed.”

Anakin laughed. “Well, it’s a father’s prerogative to spoil his baby boy,” he said, looking proudly at his new son. “My sweet baby boy,” he added softly, kissing little Ani again, loving the smell of his newborn skin.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir,” the droid interjected. “But I need to attend to your wife.”

Anakin nodded, and stood up with little Ani still in his arms. “Of course,” he said.

“Dad! Dad are you home?”

Anakin walked over to the balcony doors and opened them to look downstairs. Sure enough, there were Luke, Leia and Han.

“I’ll be right there,” he called down to them. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

Chapter 108

EPILOGUE

Four years later

“Good morning younglings.”

“Good morning Master Luke!”

Luke smiled at the enthusiasm of his small class of younglings. “Is everyone ready for some saber practice?” he asked, knowing exactly what the answer would be.

“Oh yes, Master!” they replied, almost in unison.

“Alright then, lower your blast shields, younglings,” he commanded. The children complied at once.

Luke brought out the remotes and activated them, set on the lowest setting of course, and released them into the room. Each of the younglings held their small weapon in their hands eagerly, readying themselves for the exercises to commence.

Luke walked about the room, encouraging his young students, giving pointers when necessary. He could not help but notice how much his own brother, Anakin Junior, stood out among the other younglings. His skill was almost as developed as Luke’s at the tender age of four.

“Very good, Ani,” Luke said to his brother. “You’re getting better every day.”

Ani stopped his exercises and took off his helmet. He looked up at his big brother, his large brown eyes full of hero worship. “Thank you, Master Luke,” he said, suppressing a giggle as he always did when he called his brother *Master*.

Luke grinned at him, and tousled the boy’s sandy blond hair. “Back to work now,” he said. He bent down close so only Ani could hear him. “Later I’ll take you out for some flying practice, would you like that?”

“Oh yes,” Ani replied at once. “Can I drive this time?”

“I think so,” Luke replied with a smile.

Ani grinned, and then replaced the helmet and recommenced his exercises.

As Luke continued to instruct his students, he reflected that soon there would be two more candidates for the knighthood. His sister Leia was pregnant with twins and due within the next few weeks. Han was already a nervous wreck, Luke reflected with a smile. *He has no idea what he’s in for with two Force sensitives on his hands.*

“How was saber practice?” Anakin asked as his two sons met him in the vestibule of the Temple.

“It was fun,” Ani told his father as Anakin picked him up.

“Fun?” Anakin replied with an expression of mock seriousness. “Now what would Master Yoda say if he heard you say that?” he asked his young son.

“He’d say *a Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind*,” Ani responded at once, doing an imitation of the old Jedi master that caused both his father and brother to burst out laughing.

“Yes, that’s exactly what he’d say,” Anakin replied. “But you know what I’d say?”

“What, Daddy?” Ani asked with a smile.

“I’d say if you’re not having fun, you mustn’t be doing it right,” Anakin replied with a grin, causing his young namesake to giggle.

“Luke said he’s going to take me flying,” Ani told his father excitedly. ‘And that I can fly this time!’

Anakin nodded. “Good, I think you’re ready,” he said. “I was flying at your age,” he added. “And so was your brother.”

“Were you, Luke?” Ani asked.

Luke nodded. “Yup,” he replied. “I sure was.”

“Did Daddy take you out like he takes me?” Ani asked.

Luke and Anakin looked at one another. Young Ani had not yet been told about his family’s unusual history. They all knew in time it would be unavoidable, but for now, it was agreed that he was simply too young to understand.

“Yes, he sure did,” Luke said, taking his brother from his father’s arms and setting him on his back. “Now let’s go, before Master Yoda catches us.”

Ani laughed as Luke set off at a gallop with his little brother on his back. Anakin watched with pride as his two sons disappeared into the enormous corridors of the Jedi temple.

The temple was no longer a place of painful memories for Anakin; rather it was a place of hope and joy for what the future held for his family and for the Jedi Order. He had helped to remake that Order, now his own progeny would see to it that it continued, even when he himself had passed from this world into the oneness of the Force. He had made it work, when no one thought he could; and now, thanks to the example set by him and his beloved wife, all Jedi were permitted to have families. Leia was about to begin hers, and as for Luke... Anakin wasn’t sure, but he had a strong suspicion that there was a special someone in his life. *Luke will tell us when he’s ready*, Anakin reflected as he headed towards the landing platform behind the temple.

He nodded in greeting to two of the newer recruits, former members of the Rebel Alliance who had shown great promise as Jedi hopefuls. With peace now in the galaxy, the Force sensitive beings were coming from all over to the Temple, and the Order was growing in numbers each day. The enemies who had made the attempt on his life mere weeks before the birth of young Ani had been sentenced to the spice mines of Kessel, where they would spend a life time of hard labor for their treachery. All was well, all was peaceful; Anakin had never known such peace in his life, even as a young boy. It was a good feeling.

Getting into his speeder, Anakin watched for a moment as his two sons raced across the darkening Coruscant sky. He smiled, feeling their excitement as intensely as if it were his, and then headed for home.

THE END